

To Build a Fire

by Jack London

1. (a) Describe the setting of the story 'To Build a Fire'. Why did Jack London particularly choose this setting?

Answer: Jack London chose to situate his stories in the snowy, sub-freezing world of Yukon. 'To Build a Fire' is no exception to it and the story is set in the cold world of the northern Arctic region. The action of the story takes place on the Yukon trail with a man and a dog set out to reach his friends in a camp. London begins his story with the words "Day had dawned cold and grey when the man turned aside from the main Yukon trail." The first line itself describes the harsh conditions and extreme climate against which the story is going to take place. The day is very cold; the earth is covered under a thick blanket of ice with no trace of the sun. For miles, the only thing to be noticed is the white snow. London very categorically makes it clear to the readers that the man is naïve to have challenged the hostility and mercilessness of nature.

London specifically chose the Yukon trail as the place of setting for his story because London writes, "there seemed to be indescribable darkness over the face of things." his words are taken to be serious as the story is indeed a tragic tale of the man's futile attempt to cross the Yukon trail. He will have to succumb to the power of nature and lose his life for being too confident of his survival instincts. The pine-covered trees are the only form of vegetation and they do not symbolize the hope of survival but the means that will trigger the doom of this man.

He had spent an influential part of his life, mining for gold in the north. Familiarity with the region and the American readers' craze for stories based on the Klondike Gold Rush was reason enough to base his short story here. The Klondike Gold Rush saw Americans flocking in great numbers to Canada's Yukon territory in the hope of discovering gold.

London was of the belief that modernization and the advent of machines had rendered people useless. They had forgotten their animal instincts for survival. People, if they wished to remain strong while fighting the forces of nature, needed to reconnect with nature and it is with this belief Jack creates the man who is strong, tough and determined to reach his destination but naïve to be not able to fathom the power of Nature. London, through this story, is trying to make the readers realize that modern life may have cushioned our existence but despite that, we cannot take our survival for granted when the situation demands.

(b) How does the man allow his pride to interfere with his survival? Explain with examples from the text.

Answer: In the tragic tale of survival narrated by Jack London, the reason behind the man's death cannot just be attributed to the hostility of nature. The situation needs to be probed and evaluated and then the reasons need to be ascertained. On the superficial level, the primary reason for the man's death is the cold and the lack of fire. However, the real reason that leads to his untimely death is his pride, his overconfidence and lack of understanding of the forces of nature.

The man, before setting on his journey in the Yukon trail, met an old man at the Sulphur Creek who advised him against travelling alone in sub-freezing temperatures of Yukon. The man failed to imagine the difficulties of survival in such terrain and laughed off the suggestions, being sure about his bravery and quick common sense. When his hands and toes became numb to the extent that he found it difficult to light a fire, he recalled the old man's counsel and confessed, "That man from Sulphur Creek had spoken the truth when telling how cold it sometimes got in this country." The harshness of the conditions made him accept that "one must not be too sure of things."

The man was quick to adapt himself to situations and was ready to fight the atrocities of nature. He was well-versed with the precautions and dangers of travelling in such a terrain, yet he was not far-sighted to heed them. He is reminded of the old man's advice that "no man should travel alone in that country after fifty below zero," when he failed to light a fire for his survival. The wet clothes and the cold added to his misery, making him lose the sensations in his hands and feet. It was a necessity that he had so clearly ignored a partner on the trail who would have helped him "built the fire" and saved his life.

The man despite the folly of his pride and overconfidence was a brave man who stood against the trials of nature and fought valiantly until he accepted death in a calm and dignified manner. London with clear examples indicated that man should not be prey to his pride and overconfidence and lose on something as precious as life. The man in his journey remembers the old man's advice six times. In spite of being aware of each and every precaution, he succumbs to his death. This was inevitable because his quick sense and agility had no comparison against the forces of nature and the experience and wisdom of the old man.

(c) What leads to the death of the man?

Answer: In a clear scheme of things, the man in Jack London's short story dies because he is unable to light a fire that could aid his survival. The man before beginning his trail is aware of the perils of travelling in the country. He is cautious and completely confident of finishing his journey on time. The man walks vigilantly, avoiding the pools of water under the snow; however, he breaks through the ice at a place where there were "no signs" of danger, wetting his feet till his knees. The man knew there was no going further on the trail

without drying his mittens and socks. He stopped to light a fire and chose a place under the pine trees. The firewood was easily available and he slowly lit a match to burn the fire. In no time, he had created a roaring fire which was the hope for his survival in this harsh climate. He was working carefully, ensuring that he makes no mistakes that could take away his hope for survival. The man knew there was no another chance, and thus he must not fail.

The cold was setting in and he lost the feeling in his feet while his fingers had grown completely numb. However, he was convinced of his efforts and was sure he would soon be able to dry up his socks and mittens. He confidently finished what he had to do and was just about to remove his mittens and socks when the fire was snuffed by the snow falling from the pine trees. The man had faltered and it was his own mistake. He had to begin again to light a fire but no more had the same energy and confidence. He seemed to have guessed that his mistake had invited death and minimized his chances of survival.

He began with his efforts and created the space for the fire in an open area. He got the firewood together and searched for the bark, but he could not take it out with his freezing hands. His feet were already suffering the onslaught of cold. His bare fingers could not work anymore, he was struggling to light a match and in his efforts to separate the matches, the packet fell on the snow. He now had a huge task at hand. With fingers dead; he decided to rely on his eyesight to guide him but he could not do it. Tired, he picked up the match in his teeth and drew it across his leg to light the bark. But the burning got to his nose and made him cough and eventually, the match fell into snow. The man had been naïve to set out on a journey without a partner.

The man was determined to save his life and with all his efforts lighted all the seventy matches of the pack. Fire was lit and in the process, he had burnt his hands. He endured the pain because fire was the lifesaving agent at this hour, yet all his efforts were thwarted when a wet plant fell on the fire and scattered it everywhere. He tried to get the sticks together but in vain.

His last hope of survival was the dog, who he decided to kill and bury his hands inside its warm body. But unfortunately, his hands did not have the sensations and the energy to hold a knife and kill the dog. The man was thus forced to run to keep his body warm but when he could no longer run, he decided to face his death with dignity.

While his inability to light the fire was the primal reason of his death yet on deeper probing we realize that it was the man's pride and overconfidence that led to his doom. He failed to realize the gravity of the forces of nature and relied too much on his ability. He paid no heed to the advice given to him and thus suffered the inevitable.

Long Questions and Answers

1. What contrast is made between man and dog in 'To Build a Fire and in what ways does the dog seem to have more sense than the man?

OR

How does the dog's point of view about the setting differ from the man's point of view?

Answer: Jack London's story "To Build a Fire" is all about a man's fight with Nature. A dog follows the man in his arduous journey. The dog survives but the man dies, and this has much to do with their approach to Nature.

The man is arrogant and foolish in deciding to undertake a journey across the Yukon on a bitter cold day. He feels confident enough to trek alone without a partner. He does not listen to the well-meant advice of the old man of Sulphur Creek. The man dismisses it as 'womanly' but later has to admit that the old man was right.

The dog is introduced as a foil to the man. It does not approve of the man walking in the icy cold region but follows him out of sheer obedience. Its instinct says that this is the time for retreating into the warmth of a fire. It is apprehensive of the man's insistence on going ahead when the temperature is far below minus fifty degrees. It is depressed by the tremendous cold, its tail droops in discouragement. It does not know anything about thermometers: there is no sharp consciousness but the inner voice tells it that this is no time to travel. Once, it breaks through ice wetting its feet and promptly bites out the ice that has formed between its toes to avoid sore feet. It does not know this, but is mysteriously prompted by the accumulated knowledge of its ancestors. Also, its suspicious nature senses the murderous intention of its companion, which helps it to avoid certain death. At the end, it senses the smell of death emanating from the man and trots up the trail seeking for other food and fire providers.

In contrast to the dog, the man uses his judgment, which goes terribly wrong as he fails to foresee the danger. Unlike the dog, he does not respect the power of Nature. The gloom, the lack of sunlight, the strangeness, the weirdness of it all does not worry him. The problem is that he is totally devoid of imagination. He is quick and alert but does not think of his frailty as a creature of temperature, a human that can live only within the parameters of certain degrees of cold and heat. He also makes the mistake of making fire under a snow-laden spruce tree, ignoring the voice of wisdom or common sense.

In short, the story can be considered as a tussle between Naturalism, which is represented by the wolf-dog, a native of the land and Realism, represented by the man, a stranger and newcomer to the place.

2. Comment on the setting of the story 'To Build a Fire'.

Answer: Jack London gives a vivid portrayal of the natural setting in such a way that the reader feels very much a part of the story. Specific details of the environment are pointed out to create an atmosphere of gloom and foreboding.

Nature is shown at her cruellest, best in her icy cold setting. The frailty of man is contrasted with the power of Nature. That the day is cold and grey is made clear at the outset. There is no hint of sun. Yukon is a mile wide and hidden under three feet of ice and many feet of snow. His spittle crackles mid-air indicating that it is much below minus. His nose and cheekbones are sore, his beard and moustache is frosted and the tobacco juice has made a brown muzzle below his chin.

The man accidentally breaks the ice and wets his feet. He wants the fire to save his feet. Fire is the only protection but he miserably fails to make one and that spells his doom.

The man is punished by Nature for his arrogance, for his inability to understand his frailty when faced with the superior power of Nature and lack of foresight. The icy landscape looms large throughout the story, making the human so puny and ineffectual. The man's pathetic efforts to build a fire are thwarted by the forces of Nature. Only if he had respected her power, and been more like his companion dog, he would have escaped death.

The man suffers because of the mistakes he makes, as he does not have imagination or instinct to survive the challenges thrown by the superior power. He first throws caution to the wind and decides to travel alone. He makes fire under the snow-clad spruce tree. He thinks of running to thaw the numbness caused by cold but his endurance deserts him. He cannot bring blood flow to his cheeks, to his hands. When he realizes he is running like a chicken with its head cut off, he succumbs to the power of Nature.

Throughout the narration, the setting stands not in the background but very much in the foreground, playing the role of a full-fledged character-threatening, menacing and all-pervading.

3. Describe the various themes that constitute the story.

Answer: The main theme that comes across is the relationship and the conflict between man and the natural world. If a man remains in the limits that nature has drafted for him, both can live in unity. When the pride of man breaks its limits, it will result in disharmony and destruction.

The wolf dog's primitive instinct helps it to survive the hostile weather whereas the man's logical calculations fail miserably. The man has personal experience but the dog's experience is from every blood ancestor. Dog's experience tells it to be close to fire whereas

the man wants to walk ahead in the cold and reach his destination. Fire represents humanity's control over nature whereas, ice and snow represent the relentless unforgiving lessons imparted by nature. Fire is life-giving, ice is death. Inability to light the fire shows how vulnerable man is when confronted with forces beyond his control.

Man's foolishness and folly is another factor that ties the theme together. Choosing to travel alone, in spite of the well-meant advice of the old man, is utter foolishness. Choosing to make fire under the ice-laden spruce tree is folly and sheer negligence of the voice of wisdom.

That pride and arrogance weaken man's chance of survival is the recurrent theme in the story. Man has to cultivate a healthy respect for the strength of nature. Man's practical knowledge hampers his imagination.

Amidst all these undercurrents, there is the perseverance of man that has to be admired and applauded. We develop an admiration for the man who tries his best to overcome the threats but when things go beyond his endurance, he accepts death with dignity.