“To Build A Fire”

“To Build A Fire,” by Jack London, involves the conflict of human vs nature, and although the conflict is obvious to the reader, the main character in this story does not realize that the conflict exists at first. In the very introduction of the story, the reader is given details about the setting. The man is on the Yukon trail in the winter, and appears to be alone with a dog. With the temperature “fifty degrees below zero,” the audience immediately understands that these conditions are simply unsafe and could potentially be fatal for the man. Despite the imminent dangers, the man still decides to leave his group and take “the long trail to look at the possibility of floating logs from the islands in the Yukon down the river when the ice melted.” The first few paragraphs of this story offer many opportunities for the reader to pick up on foreshadowing that the outcome of this expedition will have the possibility of disaster. There is “no sun in the sky,” and there are “three feet of ice” with almost as much snow on top. The only food that the man has is a piece of bread under his jacket that will freeze if taken out, and he also has a “generous portion of cooked meat.” The beginning of the fundamental conflict of the man and the nature that surrounds him occurred when the man first left his group to find a way to find a log delivery route in the river.

There is a juxtaposition between the conflict between the man and nature and the simple existence of the dog with nature. Throughout human history on this planet, the ability to communicate has allowed humans to take advantage of the development of technology, like warm clothing, electric heaters, and countless other things that would help keep the man alive in the cold. However, in this situation, the man’s emotional pride blocks the natural instinct to be wary of the cold. The dog, who does not have pride, is able to sense the danger.

*The dog did not know anything about temperature. Possibly in its brain there was no understanding of a condition of very cold, such as was in the man’s brain. But the animal sensed the danger. Its fear made it question eagerly every movement of the man as if expecting him to go into camp or to seek shelter somewhere and build a fire*.”

As the man walks along the creek, he puts himself at risk of falling into the water. The theme of this story moves to argue that when alone, a person is not able to overpower the forces of nature. As the cold weather begins to take its toll on the way the man’s thoughts, he begins to forget to do simple things, like building a fire, or keeping his mittens on after eating his lunch. Eventually, though, he does build a fire, and uses it to melt the ice on his face while he eats.

Eventually, the man starts up again on his progress to the camp where he plans to meet his fellow explorers. Due to a lack of sound thought and careful inspection of his path, he finds himself stepping on a weak spot in the snow where streams of water puddled up under the snow in shallow pools that existed over the main ice. “At a place where there were no signs, the man broke through. It was not deep. He was wet to the knees before he got out of the water to the firm snow.”

The narration of this story (third person omniscient) repeatedly reminds the reader that the natural instinct of the dog regarding survival is much stronger than that of the man. This is because the history of humans has been aided with invented tools and the use of fire to generate heat. The dog was sorry to leave and looked toward the fire.

*This man did not know cold. Possibly none of his ancestors had known cold, real cold. But the dog knew and all of its family knew. And it knew that it was not good to walk outside in such fearful cold.*

This story is aimed at arguing that although humans have been able to thrive for thousands of years by collective efforts at survival and through the development of tools, humans have become removed from the survival instincts that animals like dogs have. As the story reaches the end, the man quickly falls victim to the harsh cold, environment and lays down to die. Upon the death of the man, the dog “ran along the trail toward the camp it knew, where there were the other food providers and fire providers.” This story ties into the theme of my anthology because the numerous instances of the man demonstrating a lack of understanding of how nature works and the uncanny ability of the dog to pick up on subtle clues from the man’s behavior and other surroundings leans to argue that the ability of mankind to overcome the force and strength of nature is limited by mankind’s inability to properly process danger.