Individualism in *To Build a Fire*

Jack London was one of the most prolific writers of the 20th century, and his life was just as much of an adventure as his writing. Having journeyed into the Yukon himself, it comes as no surprise that many of his stories contain vivid details of the cold and unforgiving climate of the northern frontier. *To Build a Fire* provides commentary on America in the early 20th century through the eyes of London. Through naturalism, London critiques the emphasis on individualism in America.

Jack London led a life filled with exciting travels and experiences. According to an overview of London's life, he had worked a number of manufacturing jobs in California as an adolescent. Partially because of this, he joined the Socialist Labor Party in 1896, and he would continue to support and participate in it for the rest of his life. Shortly after, London would travel to northwestern Canada as part of the 1897 Klondike Gold Rush. Although he did not find monetary success as a miner, he gained much experience through living in the cold and unforgiving climate. Afterward, he returned to Oakland and began writing (Milne 335). Many of his novels and short stories are based on his personal experiences in the Yukon. Additionally, he uses these stories as a means to express his worldview to others.

In 1902, London published his first edition of *To Build a Fire*. By then, London was already an internationally recognized author through works like *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*. *To Build a Fire* was just one of the hundreds of short stories he produced in his lifetime. In it, he tells the story of an unnamed man, who will be referred to as "the man" throughout this paper, who sets out on a winter trek through the Yukon with no one else except for a native husky. Eventually, his decision to go against the wisdom of the "old-timer" and travel by himself catches up to him when he partially falls into a frozen pool of water. After forgetting the

old-timer's advice of not lighting a fire under a tree, the snow from the tree smothers the fire. The man soon freezes to death, and utters his last words, "You were right, old hoss; you were right" (London 133). Like many other works by London, *To Build a Fire* explores the theme of nature and its dangers.

In order to capture the deadliness of the Yukon for *To Build a Fire*, London utilizes the repetition of specific phrases and ideas. According to an analysis of *To Build a Fire* by Lee Clark Mitchell, London repeats the word "cold" over 25 times in the first half of the story, and phrases related to temperature like "seventy-five below zero" over a dozen times. Additionally, Mitchell notices that most of the hazards come in some form of "H_2O" (80). Be it water, ice, or snow, London presents the Yukon as an unending onslaught of dangers and uncertainties. There was no safe place for the man, save for the dainty fires he created. According to Mitchell, "The very invocation of 'flame' five times in seven sentences ensures not the prospect of fiery success, but rather ephemeral hope" (81). Compared to the unrelenting cold, the fire provides very little other than a very brief sense of safety. The cold is everlasting, while the flame is temporary. By comparing these two, it is clear that the cold will always outlast the flame. Through repetition, London successfully creates a foreboding atmosphere that suggests that anything could go wrong at any point in time. This was a place where only the most capable and most resourceful could survive.

At the beginning of the story, the man is introduced as a chechaquo, or someone who is new to the area. While the man claims that he is very observant, his unfamiliarity with the environment quickly shows. As London describes the man's first lunch of the trip, "He tried to take a mouthful, but the ice muzzle prevented. He had forgotten to build a fire and thaw out. (127)". Even though he is aware of the fact that he is in minus seventy-five-degree weather, he is

so unperturbed by that fact that he initially forgets to build a fire when he eats his lunch. It seems that he is able to process information at an empirical level, but is unable to apply the knowledge to his own situation. To him, minus seventy-five degree weather is more of a number than an actual threat. This gives him the confidence to travel alone but does not give him the skill or reasoning to actually survive. James Bowen of the Southern Oregon College examines the cause of the man's death. He writes, "Men of limited mental capacity fail; and that human beings who exercise good judgment, tempered with emotional insights are the human beings who win out over a hostile environment" (289). The man has limited mental capacity, as showcased by his forgetfulness when he initially forgets to start a fire when eating his lunch. He clearly does not exercise good judgment, since he chooses to travel alone. Lastly, his emotions are not tempered, as he is extremely overconfident throughout the entire trip. As the story continues to progress, the man's lack of survival skills continues to become increasingly apparent.

Despite being in completely unfamiliar lands, the man was confident in himself and believed that he knew better than the old-timer. An analysis by Jeanne Reesman claims that the "wise old man from Sulphur Creek" represents the trail wisdom that the man lacks (29). The old-timer has knowledge and wisdom from practical experience. The man's repeated failure to heed the old-timer's advice, despite being aware of it, suggests a level of overconfidence that led him to believe he knew better than the old-timer. It's possible that the man dismissed the old-timer's warnings as outdated or irrelevant because he did not recognize the value of the trail wisdom the old-timer accumulated over time. The man's arrogance towards both nature and the old-timer is a result of an individualistic culture and eventually leads to his downfall.

Individualism has been an integral part of American history and culture since the birth of the nation. In the late 19th century, the idea had arguably reached its peak popularity. At the time,

the United States was going through a period of time known as the Gilded Age. The country was rapidly industrializing, and power was concentrated in the hands of large corporations. According to Stephen Roddewig of James Madison University, the American government believed that laissez-faire policies would create a strong economy, and as such, antitrust and workplace safety laws were minimal. This granted successful capitalists unprecedented amounts of influence and control over the economy and politics. (371). It was a time when large corporations exploited people for cheap labor, carelessly polluted the environment, and engaged in other corrupt and unethical practices.

In order to justify their success, they embraced the idea of social Darwinism. It is the notion that successful people do better than others solely because they possess innately superior characteristics compared to everyone else. Whether they are smarter, harder-working, or more creative, the people at the top claim that they got there by their own accord. Individualism and the idea of the self-made man began to play an even more important role in society, as people were encouraged to pursue success through their own efforts. It reinforced the notion that success was solely the result of personal ambition and hard work, rather than acknowledging the impactful role that others play in shaping one's opportunities and outcomes.

It is clear that the man is a firm believer in the individualist ideology. Roddewig even asserts that London wanted the man to represent individualism as a whole (372). Many of the man's thoughts and actions reveal what his beliefs are like. London describes what the man was thinking after successfully building a fire after partially falling into a lake, "Well here he was; he had had the accident; he was alone; and he had saved himself. Those old-timers were rather womanish, some of them, he thought" (129). This excerpt demonstrates that the man believed that he was superior to the old-timers, specifically the old-timer that told him that traveling alone

in the Yukon was a bad idea. It is ironic that the man was a chechaquo, and he thought that he knew better than the old-timer. He believed that working together was “womanish”, which in this case means weak. He sees himself as the better man because he was able to save himself without the help of others. Overall, the man’s behaviors clearly demonstrate his support for the individualist ideology since he prioritizes his self-reliance over his own safety.

By drawing upon his lived experiences, London successfully creates a formidable Arctic-like atmosphere—one that is full of danger and surprises, and where only the strong survive. When the man finds himself alone in that place ruled by Darwinism, he remains unworried. But, many of his actions prove that he is not the most capable of people. Having a surface-level understanding of the risks and being too sure of his own skills, the man somehow is unfazed by the danger he is in until it is too late. This confidence is rooted in the man’s belief in individualism and self-reliance. He believed himself to be innately superior to others, such as the old-timer, because he was able to fend off danger alone. However, when the man ultimately succumbs to the deadly environment, his final words are. “You were right, old hoss you were right” (London 133). This shows that the man finally realizes that he should have listened to the old-timer’s advice: traveling alone was not a good idea. This last line of dialogue suggests that London wanted to expose the flaws rooted in individualism. Perhaps London and his socialist leanings did not believe the wealthy elites’ claims of being self-made men. Regardless, it is clear that one message London sent through writing these thematic undertones is: Some things cannot be done alone.

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