

Week4

Literature



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London and Crane Stories have been written many times over the years describing the unimaginable heartache of being lost at sea. Perhaps the Titanic tragedy and the subsequent novels and movies about the ship have given us a pretty accurate description, for the seven hundred survivors waited in the icy water for several hours before help arrived. Indeed several hundred others died of hypothermia awaiting rescue. So it was for the four who survived *The Commodore* in a somewhat true story by Stephen Crane called "The Open Boat". For a while the four strangers had something of camaraderie and were more or less lighthearted. One is almost overcome with the despair they must have felt was opined by the Correspondent when they had their hopes of rescue dashed at the Lighthouse. "Was I brought here merely to have my nose dragged away as I was about to nibble the sacred cheese of life?" (Crane)

Jack London was another American author, known for his gritty portrayals of life in the frontier, especially Alaska, during the turn of the century gold rush. One such story was "To Build a Fire", again set in the Yukon and one man's interminable will to survive in temperatures at minus seventy-five degrees. Even the dog beside him knew by instinct that such temperatures were not survivable, for indeed by the end of the story he had succumbed to the cold and the dog had abandoned him. The whole story reverberates with the ferocity of Nature at its worst and how mammals, especially Man, are susceptible to its whims. For this story it was the cold but in Crane's above it could have been a quick squall, since it was based near Florida. The Man's lowest point is when after falling through the snow, he finally is able to build a fire to dry his frostbitten feet and he is jubilant that he will survive where

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others didn't. Yet the snow is dislodged from the tree above the fire and extinguishes it. He then becomes so desperate that he burns his own hands with the matches in order to thaw them out. Knowing he will be maimed he is nonetheless comforted by the fact that his friends will take care of him. His hopelessness and acceptance of death is magnified to the reader when after attempting to run, in a futile attempt to thaw his body out, he thinks " Well, he was bound to freeze anyway, and he might as well take it decently" (London).

Both authors died young but lived a full life and their stories reflected their ideas on the subject of fate. True they gave the indication that things are somewhat predestined and it is true that Nature is fairly constant. For example, the Oiler, one of the strongest of the four, is the only one to perish while the badly injured Captain has survived. Yet at the same time the works show that taking fate into one's hands can indeed change the outcome. If the four had stayed on the lifeboat they all might have died. By the same token, if London's prospector had stayed with his first fire, he may have endured. Both stories tell one thing, the freedom to choose one's fate. That is why Americans have fought so many times for that word, freedom. From the Minutemen to Meriwether Lewis to John Glen and on to the young people in the Middle East, Americans have quickly volunteered to explore and battle the unknown and sometimes it cost lives, like our prospector. Americans are also quick to battle those who would oppress those freedoms.

WORKS CITED

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< <http://public.wsu.edu/~campbelld/crane/open.htm> >.
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< <http://www.jacklondons.net/buildafire.html>>.