

'the open boat' and 'to build a fire' essay



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Naturalism was an offshoot of determinism and Darwinism. These schools of thought held that man had minimal control over his fate because the environment shaped his life. 'The Open Boat' and 'To Build a Fire' epitomize this literary movement. Not only do the writers use practical and succinct language that is typical of this school, but they also place greater emphasis on processes over people. This approach was in keeping with their reverence for neutrality.

Naturalists often make conservative use of language in their narrations and these two books are no exception. These authors detached themselves from their characters as well as the human situations. 'The Open Boat' describes the four men's adventures with a great degree of temperance. The author had opportunities to exaggerate their accomplishments as well as their failures, but he did not.

The desperate nature of the characters is consistent with their dreary settings, so every stylistic choice matches developments in the story. One should also note that only one of the characters in the story has a name - Billie. This level of detachment testifies to the realism that naturalists liked. Similarly, the writing in 'To Build a Fire' was objective and concise. London stays away from the emotions and insecurities of his protagonist.

Nothing sets him apart as a special individual. In fact, the hard language in the narration and the twists and turns of the story make the man seem like a sideshow. The author's language is objective and factual. For instance, he talks about the number of matches that the man used and why ice froze on his beard (London 36).

This stylistic choice was in tandem with his naturalist thought. He wanted to furnish the audience with objective information such that they can competently assess the environment. Naturalism also explains why London did not name his central character. Doing so would have detracted readers from the subject matter.

As the name implies, naturalism was a school of thought that focused on nature. It dwelt on ' what is' rather than ' what should be'. Therefore, when pioneers of the intellectual school wrote about something, they gave precedence to the environment rather than the people in them.

For instance in ' To Build a Fire', readers can find a lot of information about nature. London talks about springs, creeks, fires, snow and how each of these natural processes can change and affect the elements surrounding them. In the book, one understands the repercussions of exposing one's cheeks to extremely cold weather.

Likewise, the same description of all things natural can be found in ' The Open Boat'. Most of the discussions in the piece dwell on how the sea operates; its waves and tides can change dramatically and thus affect those who are standing on its way. At the beginning of the story, the sea seemed like a merciless monster that the men personified.

However, towards the end of the story, they soon realize that the sea is a natural object (Crane 14). It has no intentions and does not inflict deliberate harm. Crane wanted to prove that nature is ' what is'. Man is the one that gets too preoccupied with what it should be.

Naturalists ascribed to Darwinian and determinist thought. Darwin led the determinist school by demonstrating how evolution occurred. The scholar affirmed that the environment shapes organisms over extremely long periods of time. It caused them to develop different physical characteristics (mutate) from those of organisms within the same species. In subsequent times, groups that had favorable traits survived while the ones with unfavorable ones died.

Determinism proved that man was helpless against his environment. His free will had little to do with what occurred to him (Sorrentino 104). These themes are present in both narrations. In 'The Open Boat', the waves are frequently changing; the men have little control over these waves even after spending a substantial amount of time at sea. Man can do little to change the forces of nature. Therefore, he must accept this condition and only focus on reacting to what nature presents.

Naturalists believed in the insignificance of free will. Likewise, the author of 'To Build a Fire', wanted to show how even intellectualism could not save many from nature. The man had a map and was set on hunting for gold. However, he later had to abandon these ambitions because of the harsh weather.

The dog had a higher chance of survival than the man because it understood its place in the natural world. It reacted to its environment and thus outlived the man. However, the protagonist did not respect the power of the natural world and thus subjected himself to danger. The deterministic environment altered his goals and thus triumphed over his free will.

Many naturalists acknowledge the determinism of the environment, but they do not believe in its divinity. Nature was neither against or for man; it was simply present. Therefore, one should not expect moral judgment from nature as this will not materialize (Bender 92).

London does not blame the man for the fall in the snow, and neither does he blame the snow. If one must ascribe moral responsibility on a party, then it should be placed on man since he can predict the consequences of his actions. Nature is also indifferent to man in 'The Open Boat'.

The men initially blame the sea for their predicaments. In one occasion, they claim that the sea is hissing and snarling. However, the narrator later learns that nature was not against them when one large wave carries him to shore. One can thus deduce that nature is not a partisan party if it can rescue and cause harm at the same time.

Adherents of the naturalism movement favored members of the lower classes. Alternatively, their characters became classless in the wake of environmental forces. In 'To Build a Fire', the protagonist is probably one such character because he leaves his home for a dangerous expedition, in hostile weather, so as to hunt for gold (London 8). Conversely 'Open Boat' has an oiler, a correspondent, a cook as well as a captain. None of these titles matter in the grueling and unpredictable sea; all that counts is their survival.

Naturalists strongly espoused neutrality. This is evident in their succinct and factual language as well as their focus on plot rather than the people in their narrations. The authors under analysis show that man's free will is irrelevant, <https://assignbuster.com/the-open-boat-and-to-build-a-fire-essay/>

and even his intellectualism cannot fight nature. Conversely, London and Crane acknowledge the impartiality of nature and its inability to wield moral judgment over man.

Bender, Bert. *Sea-Brothers: The Tradition of American Sea Fiction from Moby-Dick to the Present*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990. Print.

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