

"to build a fire" between formalism and naturalism thesis sample

[Countries](#), [England](#)



Jack London succeeds in vividly illustrating the story he tells in "To Build a Fire", as through his writing he has the literary strength to paint the happenings and to draw the clear image of his characters and their adventures.

Moreover, the strength of his style, the form and writing technique and structure empowers the content of this short story and this strength is an attribute of formalism (Dobie 33). London's critics argue whether his writings adjust to formalism, comparing the strength of the content, versus the power of the literary art. This essay investigates whether Jack London's "To Build a Fire" is a writing belonging to formalism. In reaching this objective, the essay will summarize and analyze the literature work, by decomposing its symbols and its metaphors or other stylistic elements.

Challenging the nature is a single road journey, which cannot be successful for the man - this is the main idea that reveals from Jack London's "To Build a Fire". The novel, created in 1902, is an incipient manifestation of naturalism, setting the man in the middle of the woods, surrounded by varied natural elements (Werlock 476). Unlike the more popular idea of the communion between the man and the nature, "To Build a Fire" reflects a hateful nature, which does not attempt to make the situation easy for a man who dared to travel alone, at -59 Celsius degrees. On the contrary, empowered with human features, the nature acts like an enemy of the man, putting all kind of traps and obstacles in his journey.

The man is set to meet with his friends to search for gold, in Yukon, Alaska. Initially, the purpose of the journey becomes irrelevant in the context of the journey itself. It is a symbolical journey between the realm of life and death. The man is clinging by everything he can in order to keep himself alive, but

all the logistic he can find and that could eventually help him save his life, belong to nature. And nature seems to not desire to contribute to saving the man, but it rather acts offended that the man paid it a visit. It is like a sanctuary that rejects any human touch, as if it would represent a profanation.

Therefore, as a cruel enemy, the nature sets a spring in the man's road, in which he accidentally steps, getting his feet wet and risking losing it in the cold temperatures. When the man tries to make a fire, it initially looks that it might help him, allowing him to break twigs from the trees in order to keep the fire going. However, it reacts to a point, and throws the snow that the trees' upper twigs have gathered and sent it on the man's fire, killing it. From that moment on, it becomes very challenging for the man to re-build the fire, and when he finally succeeds, the nature plays tricks on him, determining him to accidentally kill the fire that would keep him warm. The man is losing his mind and starting to rave, thinks of killing his own dog, his husky, in order to put his hands in the dog's warm interior and the only thing that escapes the dog from his master's tentative to kill him is his physical inability to act on its purpose, as the nature got him completely frozen and helpless.

In relation to the idea of naturalism, Werlock observes that based on the Darwinian theory, the story is based on "the survival of the fittest", which also stays at the basis of the social evolution (476). The "fittest" determines the persons most fitted to face various challenges, new situations and to be able to overpass them.

The story is centered on two characters: the man and his husky wolf - dog.

The nature can be considered the third character of the novel, which is personified and presented as the bad element of the story. However, the nature is protecting itself from what it considers intrusion and moreover, a danger to itself. Taking this matter into more depth, another thought comes to mind. There are two characters wondering in the woods, but only one is vitally hurt. While the man is uselessly trying to avoid any traps that the nature might throw at him and in the end dies for not being able to react properly to nature's ways, the dog is safe of all the dangers. Although it also feels the need for food and warmth, the dog has the ability of avoiding all the traps and to adjust to the nature's ways, remaining alive.

This indicates that although as intellect the dog is inferior to the man it has the power to resist in drastic conditions, more than a man could ever be able to. His instincts help the dog to survive, as they show it the right way and its natural born senses allow him to properly answer to anything surprising, strange. Moreover, the dog has a simple mind of its own, as London indicates that it understands that the person who used to feed him and to make fire is no longer able to do this, since he is death (the dog senses death by smelling the man), and it moves along to another place, "where were the other food - providers and fire - providers" (London).

Scholars have interpreted the dog's ability to react faster and better to the nature's quick temper, as the supremacy of the instinct over the intellect. As such, Thompson states that the dog feels that it is much too cold for traveling ahead and it seem to show the man that he needs to stop, "seek a shelter somewhere and build a fire" (74).

Coming back to the Darwinian theory, it seems to be the ability to sense, to

react fast to danger, to know when to walk ahead and to know where to retreat that determines who will survive to sudden environmental changes. Darwinism, or determinism theory reflects that intellectual abilities can be lost in critical situation, as proof being precisely the fact that the man started to be delirious when he understood that he was frozen and he was about to die.

Regarding this story from another angle and returning to the idea that the man challenged the nature, one can say that the man made some poor judgments throughout his journey because he considered himself superior to nature. He considered that with his superior intellect he could dominate the nature and that he could avoid its tricks and traps. Therefore, it is human nature that determines the individual to be infatuated, considering himself the center of the universe, the ruler of the world, being able to conquer and dominate everything. This aspect is precisely revealed in London's short story, because the man was a gold seeker and he was driven to conquer as much gold as possible, passing over everything in his way, carrying about nothing.

The man of London's novel symbolizes the human grieve, the social evolution into deprivation of human feelings and traits, driven by the rush gold. In this context, the nature acts as vigilant, combating the man from destroying the environment thru his quests for gold. The idea that in the end, the true richness is in a clean and prosperous environment that people live in, the air that they breath or the water that they drink, is a discussion about the environmental sustainability in the context of man threatening its natural resources.

Therefore, nature served him a lesson about supremacy. Reminding the man that he is vulnerable, that he can sense the cold, or the freezing, nature also let him know that he was a mortal, and this was fatal lesson for the man. Auberach has depicted that London followed subjects that treated race, gender or class in his writings and he deformed these notions, thru his writing style (2-3). In addition, the same scholar also argues that London was more interested in keeping the readers interested in his writing, by proposing an interesting subject, rather than to obsessively consider the formal precision of his literature (Auberach 3).

This makes of his "To Build a Fire" a deformed short - story, as the author is interested in keeping the readers with him throughout the story, thru the quality of the events tells, but his writing style does not lack the artistic form that sharpens the formalism. Either way, the short story falls in the naturalist writing, indicating how "the fittest" will survive and adjust to drastic living conditions.

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