

Human-animal
studies,
deconstructionist, and
psychoanalytic
approach to "to
build...

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" To Build a Fire" is a short story which was written by American author Jack London. This short story is an example of the naturalist movement. This is why, it mainly shows the confliction between man and nature. Although his simple language, Jack London tells his " no named" protagonist's story in nature very well. There are three main binary oppositions. These are man versus nature, (hu)man versus animal and knowledge versus instinct. And, these oppositions can be analyzed from perspectives of Human-Animal Studies, Deconstructionist and Psychoanalytic.

The story is basically about a man and a dog in Alaska. The man, protagonist of the story, wants to meet with his friends and starts to travel in a weather which is below minus degree. Although an older man warns him, the protagonist thinks that he could manage with the weather. The protagonist and dog starts to travel. The weather grows colder, he gets numb and he starts trying to build a fire. He finishes all of his matches in order to build a fire and thinks to kill the dog to warm himself.

However, he cannot catch the dog because of being numb. He lies on snow and dies. After he dies, the dog turns back to the camp that they come from. We can give two examples from Psychoanalytic perspective. First one is the protagonist's ego that makes him think that he can manage with the weather.

His arrogance causes the situation that he is living in. And the second one is id of him makes him think to kill the dog. Desire for surviving in cold weather, fear of death and in order not to die he tries to catch the dog and kill it. And, the importance of given no name to the protagonist, comes from

the idea of generalisation. If he had a name, he would have an identity. He would be someone that we know or may be us but having no name, enables it to be everyone. It means everyone has id that directs their behaviour according to the situation.

The concept of (hu)man versus animal is another issue in the story. From perspective of Human-Animal Studies, the protagonist and the dog relationship is important. He treats his dog as his slave. He is as a gentleman(!) sends the dog before him considering that if something would happen, the dog can die. He establishes superiority on the dog considering that it is not a human being. Thus, for this story we cannot say that the relationship between the man and the dog is good. Nature was the dog's habitat, therefore he should have listened the dog, to survive. He did not listen the dog and died.

The last concept is knowledge versus instinct. It is possible to see foreshadowings from the beginning of the story with close reading. Margaret Ashmun explains the foreshadowing with these sentences:

London uses foreshadowing throughout the story leading up to the man's eventual death. Starting from the moment the old timer from Sulfur Creek advises the man not to go on his journey, bad things begin to happen to the man. His saliva freezes over his mouth because of the dangerously low temperature, the man falls through ice, the man builds his fire underneath a tree and snow falls off the tree, extinguishing his fire, and, finally, he can't clutch the dog to hold it down to kill it.

When he uses foreshadowing, he also shows the dog's instinctual behaviours that opposes to the man's knowledge. As I said above, nature is the dog's habitat, the dog feels more than the man knows in nature. Sometimes feeling can be useful more than knowledge. And these sentences are examples that supports my idea:

Throughout the story, London hints that the dog has more knowledge feeling of survival than the man. The judgment-versus-instinct theme is evident when the man builds the first fire. While the dog wants to stay by the fire to keep warm, the man is determined to keep moving. As the dog reluctantly follows the man across a frozen river, the dog is more cautious than the man.

Consequently, as an example of naturalist movement short story, it contains elements of binary opposites that can be examined from different point of views. Especially, this short story of Jack London, is very useful source for Human-Animal Studies, Deconstructionist and Psychoanalytic approaches.