

The bonds that ties
us together in to build
a fire and the open
boat



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We've all experienced those days where it seems the universe is out to kill, or at least psychologically maim, us. A series of mundane irritants accumulates into a seemingly unmanageable, insurmountable mountain, completely derailing any attempt at productivity...and in the midst of this one of many frustrating, yet trivial, scenarios is the nagging doubt that it's all for nothing. It dimly occurs to us that this is just the interim between birth and becoming worm food, that we're all just matter and energy that will eventually break down and contribute to new configurations of matter and energy. It also dimly occurs to us that this haphazard rearrangement of atoms will also fall beneath the gaze of an omnipresent—god? Force? Alien being? Or, perhaps more distressingly, it occurs to us that the gaze is nothing but an apathetic void.

Such contemplations fall to the naturalist writer to unpack. Authors like Jack London and Stephen Crane, whose respective short stories "To Build a Fire" and "The Open Boat" exemplify the genre, seek to chase this truth to its logical, frightening conclusion: we are all nothing but matter and energy with intent, and this alone does not entitle us to a nurturing, benevolent Universe or a sympathizing God. While both stories contribute to the genre by depicting humans' relationship to their environment as inherently one-sided, the authors clearly subscribe to different interpretations of that relationship. London goes out of his way to construct a conflict based purely on biological, practical matters, while Crane delves deeper into the psyche of humans looking death in the eye and meekly wondering, "Why me? Why now?"

Though achieved primarily through the use of openly hostile environments, the stories' themes are also carried by the repetition of key phrases that

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establish these authors' differing views. In "To Build a Fire," for instance, the protagonist's repeated thought "it certainly was cold" carries with it first an observation of empirical fact: the extended thought process preceding this declaration is one of blasé observation, one that "made no impression on the man" because his concern is "not in the significances" of information so much as how it immediately applies to him—in this case, merely as an obstacle (809). Here, the appearance of "it certainly was cold" is only a bored reflection of his position in the Yukon, not an instinctual fear swelling below his civilized mind to warn him. Indeed, "[t]hat there should be anything more to it than that was a thought that never entered his head" (809); the protagonist, this inexperienced chechaquo, does not consider this environment as anything more than a passing obstacle that he will surely overcome—so surely, in fact, that the thought of his death in the tundra, and the fear that follows it, does not even occur to him at this juncture.

Contrast that with the final repetition of the phrase, where it appears only a few lines before we learn that the man has frozen to death, and that he does so with a certain sense of willing resignation, insisting that the "old hoss" who had warned him of the foolishness of his actions was right all along (818). The man sees no use in fighting any longer and seems to gracefully succumb to the cold. This establishes a sense of accountability, according to Donald Pizer. In his review of Lee Clark Mitchell's book *Determined Fictions: American Literary Naturalism*, Pizer dismisses Mitchell's idea of a universal determinism that allows no real opportunities for human "free will"; in the case of London's chechaquo, Mitchell insists that this lack of agency ultimately propels the man to his frozen death. Pizer, however, contends that

London's "constant attachment of blame and therefore moral responsibility" to the intrepid protagonist clearly makes the case for human agency rather than human impotence (260). The man has overstepped the boundaries of his biological limitations and justifiably suffers the consequences. London attaches the chechaquo's death to the man's own lack of awareness, his own lack of "imagination" that might have chimed in and alerted him to his fatal can-do, can-have attitude that ineffectively defies the inimical Yukon winter. The man's death, London suggests, could easily have been avoided had he only tapped in to his basic survival instincts rather than his purely human desire to conquer a hostile environment for the purely human desire to obtain arbitrarily meaningful wealth. By rejecting the instinctual understanding that humans must bend their will, contort their imagination, to their environment, and not visa versa, the chechaquo illustrates London's belief that, while death is obviously inevitable, misplaced arrogance and lack of respect, and lack of the intuitive imagination that acknowledges things worthy of respect, will exacerbate the process.

Crane, too, illustrates the inevitability of death in "The Open Boat"; however, more so than London, Crane insists that respect and willingness to be held accountable for failure amounts to nothing when the Universe is so clearly indifferent to human—or all—life. Unlike "To Build a Fire," Crane's short story revolves around characters trapped in a situation where seemingly nothing short of divine intervention can provide succor. The chechaquo knowingly dismisses the experience of his fellows, but the shipwrecked crew of "The Open Boat" find themselves in the eye of peril despite their combined knowledge, experience, and caution. The crew's

repeated sentiment of “ If I am going to be drowned...why...was I allowed to come thus far...?” (784) suddenly becomes much more poignant; it suggests an ingrained sense of injustice toward the situation that, based on their collective skill set, should not have happened. Here, even with the presence of awe, caution, and presumably the “ imagination” found lacking in London’s protagonist are rendered insignificant by a Universe that sees neither right nor wrong, skilled nor unskilled, sentient nor completely instinctual.

Moreover, the crew’s sentiment about drowning after “ coming thus far” parallels all humans’ experiences when confronting their own mortality. Because this feeling is collective (“ As for the reflections of the men...they might be formulated thus”) rather than individual, and yet is not more or less significant than an individual’s supplications, Crane presents this density of despair as wholly impotent and objectively useless (784). The mere presence of impassioned struggle or seething rage does not—indeed, cannot—impress itself on an indifferent Universe. There is no assigning of responsibility in the case of these four crew members, and this lack of responsibility, coupled with their frantic, diligent struggle, manifests as a profound sense of injustice. Here, Crane implies, the will to live does not entitle one to life. No matter how “ good” we act or how willingly we obey instinct, in the end we all die...and in the end, no great, nurturing God cares that we die.

The lack of an empathetic Universe is no reason for humans to resign themselves to a life of apathy and nihilism, however. While “ The Open Boat” dabbles in the darker themes of humans’ “ absurd” existence, devoid of intrinsic meaning, Crane still insists that inevitable death of the individual is <https://assignbuster.com/the-bonds-that-ties-us-together-in-to-build-a-fire-and-the-open-boat/>

trumped by the bonds of kinship and empathy that tie humans together. “ It would be difficult to describe the subtle brotherhood of men that was here established on the seas,” Crane writes. “ No one said that it was so. No one mentioned it, but it dwelt in the boat, and each man felt it warm him” (781). The struggle and tendency toward despair is mitigated by the fact that no man is alone in his fear, and this sense of togetherness, while obviously forced by circumstance, is no less useful in providing the protagonists a sense of meaning in an environment that otherwise forces them to doubt their significance in the Universe. To an extent, even London suggests human connection may be spiritually fulfilling institution, if not a particularly useful one. The chechaquo consistently refers to “ the boys” waiting for him at camp, “ the boys” who will find his frozen body, “ the boys” who will presumably mourn him or at least notice the loss of his presence and deem it significant (818). While admitting that his blunders have led him to a premature death, his final thoughts are about the connection he’s forged with his fellows, the connection that, in part, propelled him to keep pressing forward until he no longer could. Even peripherally, a sense of optimism lurks in both stories, suggesting that, regardless of Universal significance, humans find strength and reassurance in the significance of their relationships.

Whether illustrated in more deterministic terms or in profoundly fatalistic terms, the fact remains the same: we all die, and nothing significant can ultimately be attached to these deaths. Ultimately, the external, hostile Universe may succeed in killing off every outraged, despairing human in existence—but the bonds formed by kinship are soldered by that outrage and despair, by the creeping sense of mortality or the immediate threat of

annihilation. And in the brief interim between birth and death, those bonds knit humans together. As exemplified in “ To Build a Fire” and “ The Open Boat,” whether trapped beneath an apathetic eye or a gaping void, humans have forged their own meaning.