

To build a fire and the
hunger artist



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When men challenge nature they allow themselves no fate aside from death. Jack London and Franz Kafka each orchestrate settings comparable to hell in their short stories “ To Build a Fire” and “ The Hunger Artist”, respectively.

London references “ Sulphur Creek”, where the man first received warnings of his ignorant decisions, and “ burning brimstone”, these words are commonly associated with hell itself (London 317-325). Symbolism is used to indicate how these characters voluntarily confine themselves in life threatening situations with the belief that they can overcome on their own merits despite the harsh odds. The “ Chequano”, the nickname (only given name) for the character in “ To Build a Fire”, believed in his own ability, “ That there should be anything more to it than that was a thought that never entered his head” (London 311). These stories are riddled with imagery that are allegorical to Jesus and the mortality of mankind such as the constant “ striking of the clock” that the hunger artist experiences (Kafka 301). These two men share a prideful nature which fuel their selfish motivations; the hunger artist questions, “ Why did people want to rob him of the fame..

.? In Jack London’s “ To Build a Fire” and Franz Kafka’s “ The Hunger Artist” the protagonists of both stories allow their hubris to reign supreme which causes their respective defeats when they challenge nature. These two characters share an utter indifference to social company, instead, they choose solitary paths, leaving them with no recourse when they fail to heed reason or accept wisdom when it is offered. Ultimately this common flaw leads to the demise of both characters. Jack London creates a setting congruent to hell.

Within this story the traveler exhibits extreme arrogance and overlooks the signs of his imminent demise. Donald Pizer assesses that, “[i]n ‘To Build a Fire,’...

we simultaneously admire... the ironic disparity between our knowledge of Danger and the newcomer’s Ignorance of it.

” (Pizer 111). This traveler is warned of the dangers, yet he voluntarily remains ignorant to the fury of this purgatory. When hell is mentioned, a hot and fiery scene immediately comes to mind; this is such an extreme environment that none could survive. The frigid and icy landscape of The Yukon in this story mirrors this effect; just as a mirror shows the same image, but backwards, the surplus of ice has the same ending as would being surrounded by fire.

This effect continues into the travelers’ experience when his body begins to freeze, “[t]he blood of his body recoiled” (London 328). This extreme cold literally sucks the life out of his body, just as fire would cause his body to lose life, from the outside-in. In “The Hunger Artist” the aging man is imprisoned in a cage, yet it was not the bars surrounding him that caused him so much grief, it was his unanswered insistence that he could continue his fast, which bars his soul. This prison becomes a hell of his own making. The more the public watches him, the deeper he sinks into his purgatory, becoming increasingly frustrated with the audiences’ inability to understand his trial; “[H]is mood was usually gloomy, and it kept growing gloomier all the time, because no one understood how to take it seriously” (Kafka 308). It was when he is caused the greatest pain in the form of temptation that he

experiences the most pleasure, “[h]e was happiest, however, when morning came and a lavish breakfast was brought for them at his own expense” (Kafka 303).

Despite his constant efforts to prove to the world, “ this dissatisfaction kept gnawing at his insides all the time” (Kafka 304). In the conclusion of the story his incidental suicide gives him reprieve- Ironically; he gave up his life to escape from hell. Symbolic references are cast throughout London’s story that reflect man’s plight to lean on his own abilities with the belief that nothing, not even nature, can defeat him. He understood the dangers that surrounded him as he walked, but they held no significance to him; they were “ facts.

.. and that was all” (London312). The most noteworthy symbol in this story begins right in the title: “ To Build a Fire”. He believes he can build his own light in the darkness. There were many indications given to the traveler that he was approaching the mouth of hell, yet he had such a blind faith in his own abilities that he proceeded anyway.

Though his knowledge of how to build a fire remained the same, as his ego grew, his ability fizzled (as did his fire). As one writer analyzes, “[r]eaders of “ To Build a Fire” certainly dread the icy grave towards which the chechaquo inexorably hikes, but, in the end, they are not morally offended by his death because he is driven to it, not by naturalistic determinism, but by his own hubris” (Haddon 23). The man believes he has the ability to battle nature alone and win. It is not for lack of abilities, but his arrogance and self reliance

that escort him to his demise. Within “A Hunger Artist” the old man’s struggle is portrayed as having a similar grapple as Christ.

In one instance they “laid his arms... in the..

. outstretched hands... but he did not want to stand up” (Kafka 302).

This relates to Jesus being laid upon the cross, with his head down in disappointment. Another relation to this same biblical event is when the artist spoke, “with his lips pursed as if for a kiss” as it was with a kiss that Jesus was betrayed (Kafka 317). The forty days and forty nights that he fasted also correlates to the holy number forty used in many instances in the bible, even in fasting itself. Machionne suggests that, “[p]resumably, it is this commercial element as well as the secular hubbub surrounding the fast that most distinguishes it from religious fasting” (Machionne 142). At the end of the story the old man admits that there is a simple reason for his ability to fast, there is no food that pleases him; it is not that having a full stomach would have been miserable to him, but that eating in itself is miserable, painful, and pointless. In the same way; to Jesus it is not that he was not tempted by the desires to sin, but that sinning itself would have caused him great distress.

Lastly, just as Jesus’ purpose in life was so strong that he was willing to die for it, so too, was the life and death of the old man. The imagery provided by London is bone-chilling. One image we are given is that there is no light; The traveler is so far north that the sun does not rise daily, “[t]here was no sun nor hint of sun” (London 311). Symbolically, God is often referred to as light; reasonably, anywhere lacking light must be lacking God.

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Still, the traveler decides that he can make it on his own (without God). As he attempts to build a fire the second and third times it is snuffed out by the darkness, or, his own arrogance causes it to fail. Hilfer makes the point that, “[u]nderlying this simple structure, like the water beneath the snow, is an ironic verbal texture that reiterates “ he knew,” “ he knew,” “ he knew” three times in one paragraph to build to the revelation that he did not know enough” (Hilfer 284). His extreme reliance on himself and his dependence on his knowledge over instincts cause him to freeze to death in the dark. A striking image provided in “ A Hunger Artist” is the table set beside his cage that contains the number of days he has fasted. This number is a subtle reminder of his frailty; he is only allowed to fast for a set number of days, just as each human only has a certain number of days on earth.

For his entire career he has insisted that he could fast much longer than he is allowed. It is not until he is finally granted this wish that no one notices. In fact, “ The...number of fast days achieved...

had long stayed at the same figure, for after the first weeks of even this small task seemed pointless to the staff” (Kafka 308). The higher his actual number of days fasted becomes, the closer he creeps to death, and the less people care about him or his accomplishment that he so desires to show them. Machosky notes that, “ An artist can always find something to eat, can always find some odd job to supply the next few meals. But an artist prefers not to.

Despite the extreme odds against success, the artist would rather starve than do something other than art” (Machosky 289). Two men allow hubris to

overtake themselves at the cost of their lives. The stories of the traveler and the hunger artist are both in settings parallel to hell. London and Kafka use symbolism to correlate their respective stories to biblical events. While the imagery in these works is a shocking reminder of mankind's humanity.

In Jack London's "To Build a Fire" and Franz Kafka's "The Hunger Artist" the protagonists of both stories allow their hubris to reign supreme which causes their respective defeats when they challenge nature. These two characters share an utter indifference to social company, instead, choosing solitary paths, leaving them with no recourse when they fail to heed reason or accept wisdom when it is offered. Ultimately this common flaw leads to the demise of both characters.