

# Chain-smoking: causality in "to build a fire"



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The modern fireplace is a marvel of invisible technology, a contained conflagration sparked by the flip of a switch and without human error or intervention. Only recently, and in the comforts of home, has building a fire been so simple. As the title implies, Jack London's 1908 short story contains within its narrative a literal set of sequential directions on how "To Build a Fire." London extends this sequential conceit to his fatidic vision of the universe. Unlike the dog in the story, who can rely on its pure-bred arctic instinct as it navigates through the dangerous tundra, the anonymous man possesses a duller, myopic instinct which is unable to foresee the consequentiality of the environment. This instinctual flaw in mankind (relative to that of a husky) is a given, but the man fails to compensate by integrating intellectuality into his journey. Were he to use all his resources efficiently, as the dog does, the man could anticipate the chain of events that leads to his demise, and then alter his literal and figurative course. Such a deconstruction of a pre-ordained universe is possible, London suggests, since the reader is made aware - through parallelism, choice wording, and other stylistic and suspenseful devices - of the subtle ways in which seemingly disconnected events are causally-linked. London prompts an investigation into the motifs of linkage in the first two sentences by crafting a landscape of connections, layers, and progression: Day had broken cold and gray, exceedingly cold and gray, when the man turned aside from the main Yukon trail and climbed the high-earth bank, where a dim and little-travelled trail led eastward through the fat spruce timberland. It was a steep bank, and he paused for breath at the top, excusing the act to himself by looking at his watch. (462) The care which London takes to produce a conjunctive atmosphere is delicate but insistent. The adverbial and

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prepositional clauses – “ when the man turned aside from,” “ where a dim,” “ through the fat spruce timberland” – create a solid and mobile image in the reader’s mind of the man’s progression on a metaphoric ladder that extends horizontally as much as it does vertically. Even the modifying adverb “ exceedingly” alters the first bleak “ Day had broken cold and gray,” cueing the reader to the probability that the temperature will worsen throughout the story (or at least the man’s reaction to it will). Throughout the story the man can only repeat to himself “ It certainly was cold,” adding surety to his present observation rather than forecasting in the way “ exceedingly” does. London further capitalizes on this scenic moment to expose the man’s status as a foil to the environmental chain, an unanchored participant who begins the story in stasis and will end in the same position. On high ground (verticality will play an important role later), the man “ pause[s]” to check the time. Rather than continuing to merge with the fluid environment, his only definition of progression is a temporal, technological one, and not geographic. Viewing the world in numerical – the narrator, or the man, later gauges the main trail’s unseen “ dark hair-line” main trail in mileage to various checkpoints – rather than spatial terms foreshadows his literal downfall. The man looks “ back along the way he had come” instead of looking forward on his route, and the description of the ground makes a punning “ no impression on the man,” as few warning signs in the story do: “ The Yukon lay a mile wide and hidden under three feet of ice. On top of this ice were as many feet of snow. It was all pure white, rolling in gentle undulations where the ice-jams of the freeze-up had formed” (462). The causal relationship between layers will become crucial later in this story, and for the man to see only the “ pure white” surface and not suspect a threat

lurking below is craftily summarized by London when he describes the man's next step: " He plunged in among the big spruce trees" (463). What prevents the man from seeing more than the surface, and refraining from such a bold plunge, is explicitly described by London early on: He was quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances. Fifty degrees below zero meant eighty-odd degrees of frost. Such fact impressed him as being cold uncomfortable, and that was all. It did not lead him to meditate upon his frailty in general, able only to live within narrow limits of heat and cold; and from there on it did not lead him to the conjectural field of immortality and man's place in the universe. (463) One of the main obsessions of Naturalism, that of processes, of omniscient descriptions of how water flows from a reservoir to a faucet to a sewer, of how meat turns into food and is digested through the body, is immaterial to the man. He is unwilling to engage his predictive intellect, even when the evidence invites analysis of processes: " The man's red beard and mustache were likewise frosted, but more solidly, the deposit taking form of ice and increasing with every warm, moist breath he exhaled" (464). The man refuses to consider consequentiality, even when his future is threatened by the accidents: " And all the time, in his consciousness, was the knowledge that each instant his feet were freezing. This thought tended to put him in a panic, but he fought against it and kept calm" (472). Compare this description to the pessimistic scenario he battles against while he runs shortly before his death: "...and that he would soon be stiff and dead. This thought he kept in the background and refused to consider. Sometimes it pushed itself forward and demanded to be heard, but he thrust it back and strove to think of other things" (476). By this point any anticipation is fatalistic, so the man's thoughts of the

present are reasonable. But during his prior attempts to revive himself, he is unable to use future plans in league with present action: " He drove the thought of his freezing feet, and nose, and cheeks, out of his mind, devoting his whole soul to the matches" (472). The mind-body link is further disrupted once he effectively loses the use of his hands, rendering natural selection's advantage of opposable thumbs moot. In place of an instinctual communication between his brain and his body, the man must compensate with sight: The dead fingers could neither touch nor clutch...He watched, using the sense of vision in place of that of touch, and when he saw his fingers on each side the bunch, he closed them - that is, he willed to close them, for the wires were down, and the fingers did not obey. (472) This movement away from a corporeal stance towards his environment incites the first glimmers of imagination and creativity in the man. He finds it " curious that one should have to use his eyes in order to find out where his hands were" (475). This curiosity extends to how " he could run at all on feet so frozen that he could not feel them when they struck the earth and took the weight of his body" (476). With death rapidly approaching, the man is fully removed from any bond with the environment: " He seemed to himself to skim along above the surface, and to have no connection with the earth" (476). The disappearance of causality between his head and his body and between his body and the earth provokes an analogous imagination in the man that has been hitherto absent: " Somewhere he had once seen a winged Mercury, and he wondered if Mercury felt as he felt when skimming over the earth" (476). The closer he comes to death, the further he abstracts himself, wholly transporting his mind from his body: " Then the thought came to him that the frozen portions of his body must be extending...the thought

asserted itself, and persisted, until it produced a vision of his body totally frozen" (476). His initial solipsism, or at least lack of external regard, is replaced by regard from the external, by sight from the outside. As death grips him he sees himself no longer as a man but as " a chicken with its head cut off - such was the simile that occurred to him" (477). His final self-vision comes from joining the boys in discovering his dead body: " He did not belong with himself any more, for even then he was out of himself, standing with the boys and looking at himself in the snow" (477). This premonition comes far too late, activated only by the immediate onset of death and not by its distant call. Even after this inspired vision of detachment, the reader is reminded once more of the static intellect that entrapped the man: " It certainly was cold, was his thought" (477). But his immobile intellect is only half of the equation. The man's reliance on his weak instinct, especially in comparison to the native husky's, plays a similar part in his ruin. Even their physical descriptions show their contrasting states of compatibility with the environment. The man may be " warm-whiskered, but the hair on his face did not protect the high cheek-bones and the eager nose that thrust itself aggressively into the frosty air" (464). His impudence in attacking nature is offset by his noble features that are not designed for such a climate. The dog-wolf, of course, may be " depressed by the tremendous cold," but is able to withstand it and, what is more, recognize that " it was no time for travelling" (464). The difference is clarified by London: " Its instinct told it a truer tale than was told to the man by the man's judgment...It experienced a vague but menacing apprehension that subdued it...and that made it question eagerly every unwonted movement of the man" (464).

Apprehension is the natural reaction in such a menacing situation for the

animal mind, instinct being based on survival. Whereas the man must be told something by his judgment, the dog has no need for any communication – it has no links which can be broken. It bites out ice from its feet without delay, and without absolutely requiring the human invention of fire: “ This was a matter of instinct. To permit the ice to remain would mean sore feet. It did not know this. It merely obeyed the mysterious prompting that arose from the deep crypts of its being” (466-467). This same recessed instinct prevents the dog from falling into the man’s trap to kill it and use its carcass for warmth: ...in his voice was a strange note of fear that frightened the animal, who had never known the man to speak in such way before. Something was the matter, and its suspicious nature sensed danger – it knew not what danger, but somewhere, somehow, in its brain arose an apprehension of the man. (474) Again, apprehension. The arrogance of the man in venturing out in such weather despite the old-timer’s advice, despite his body’s frequent warnings, and despite the first accident (the man scoffs “ Any man who was a man could travel alone”) precludes such a useful apprehension (470). But can we read the first accident as a fatidic precursor to the second, as the first link in a two-part chain? In other words, should or could the man have been apprehensive given his surroundings and operating with his intellect and instinct? Let us return to the physical description of the land. The snow and ice hides springs of water underneath their packed layers. Falling through the ice is a processional act: “ Sometimes there were alternate layers of water and ice-skin, so that when one broke through he kept on breaking through for a while, sometimes wetting himself to the waist” (466). But the man, as we have established, has problems conceptualizing and internalizing these future developments, though he does panic and shy away

from the creek. When he does break through the ice, in " a place where there were no signs" (meaning his instinct was not keen enough to detect it, and his intellect not sharp enough to heed the old man's advice), the action takes on the pronoun " it," as if nature is acting upon the man, though he is the one who plunges through the " soft, unbroken snow" that he observed in the opening scene: " Then it happened" (467-468). After supposedly defeating the wetness by building his fire, he calls it an " accident" (470). All these details set him up for the second " accident." Nearly everything is in reverse in the narrative description and in the physical reality. Again, London writes that " it happened" (471). Just as the snow was packed with fragile layers, so is each bough of the tree overhead " fully freighted" with snow (471). And just as breaking through the layers is a process, so is the dislodgment of the snow described as one: Each time he had pulled a twig he had communicated a slight agitation to the tree - an imperceptible agitation so far as he was concerned, but an agitation sufficient to bring about the disaster. High up in the tree one bough capsized its load of snow. This fell on the boughs beneath, capsizing them. This process continued, spreading out and involving the whole tree. It grew like an avalanche, and it descended without warning upon the man and the fire... (471) Without immediate warning, yes, but the accident is too similar to the first one for the sentence not to carry some irony along with its fire-snuffing snow. Another word comes into question at the start of the narrative: " It was his own fault or, rather, his mistake" (471). A fault implies an active, free-willed stake, but we are clued in by the pronoun " it" that nature is again the dominant force in the equation. A mistake is far less prominent, a mere blip on the radar screen. The man does not cause these events; they are inevitable episodes



that act upon him. We must remember that the two "accidents" are inevitable only to the extent that the man should have picked up the warning signs from the first accident, that he should not have leaned so heavily on his human instinct but incorporated his true human advantage, his predictive intellect and, above all, that he should have heeded the old-timer's advice to travel with a partner in such weather. With this in mind, London serves as an American complement to Rudyard Kipling's 1890s writings of man's confrontation with a hostile nature. Both men expose civilization, and the "civilized" mind, as a thin shield from the elements. The man's final, delusional words defer to the old-timer and continue the motif of the man's repetition in lieu of advancement: "'You were right, old hoss; you were right'" (477). He certainly was right.