

“To Build a Fire”: An Ecocritical Reading

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In the Short Story class when one of my students commented on the main human character in Jack London’s “To Build A Fire” as a fool who deserved dying because he lacked common sense and reason, such an approach did not seem to me surprising at all at that moment. As I was contemplating on the story later, however, I realized that, though it could have been regarded as right, the reaction of my student to the man in the story had been oversimplified and misleading in the sense that there had to be something more about the man’s death than his foolishness. Indeed, a close reading and analysis of the story reveals the fact that the unnamed lonely prospector in the Yukon is well-equipped for reaching his destination safely: although the weather is extremely cold in this quite northern part of the world and the land is full of dangers, the man has necessary clothing, food and equipment in addition to a wolfdog as a company to protect himself from the harsh conditions of the outer world. Moreover, he is bodily fit and personally skilled to make necessary arrangements and take immediate actions to ensure his safety and survival under such difficult conditions.

What he lacks, on the other hand, is vital: he lacks imagination, the capacity to grasp the true significance of the phenomena and to make sound judgement about the events that happen to him in nature. Unable to comprehend the meaning and consequences of travelling alone in the Yukon setting, he is vain, arrogant, and overconfident both as a human being and a male, which are the real factors, rather than his simple foolishness, causing his tragic death.

Unlike Charles E. May, who thinks that “... the man in the story is simply a living body and the cold is simply a physical fact” (24), I suggest that the story is quite rewarding for and open to an ecocritical reading and interpretation to underline how London challenges the anthropocentric worldview by showing the man’s limited powers over nature.

The protagonist acts just like the rest of humanity trying to exploit the riches of the Yukon territory, which represents human domination and exploitation of the world. His problems with the land, women, animals and common sense carry the traces of the

male-dominated economic and social order. Moreover, the destructive policies of mankind over nature, such as mining, prepare his own destruction too as the end of the story implies. In my analysis of the story, I will make use of the characteristics of “post-pastoral literature”, which the ecocritic Terry Gifford lists as follows:

Fundamental to post-pastoral literature are: (1) an awe in attention to the natural world; (2) the recognition of a creative-destructive universe equally in balance in a continuous momentum of birth, growth and decay, ecstasy and dissolution; (3) the recognition that the inner is also the workings of the outer, that our inner nature can be understood in relation to the external nature; (4) an awareness of both nature as culture and culture as nature; (5) the recognition that with consciousness comes conscience; (6) the ecofeminists’ realisation that the exploitation of the planet is of the same mind-set as the exploitation of women and minorities. (221)

Like many of his other stories and novels, London’s “To Build a Fire” is quite rewarding in terms of its consideration of the natural world, its “recognition of a creative-destructive universe,” its awareness of nature-culture connections and its manifestation of the masculine perception of women.

Jack London is considered to be one of the most prominent naturalistic writers emphasizing the significance of a universe in which human and non-human exist interdependently. In his worldwide known and acknowledged novels and stories, he depicts his human and non-human characters within their own living conditions and through their biological features particularly highlighting their interdependence and the theme of the struggle for survival. Among his works, the later version of “To Build a Fire”, published in 1908, deserves close attention with its capacity of creating an atmosphere in which the reader feels compelled to question the meaning of existence in a cosmic sense. What is striking further about the story is that London achieves such a powerful effect through an extremely plain and simple language.

“To Build a Fire” has, of course, been read and analysed from different perspectives so far and all these readings reflect coherent arguments about the story from their own theoretical stand points. May, for instance, by giving the primary role to the imagination of the author, claims that

The man’s death is significant because it symbolizes the frailty of unaccommodated man against cosmic forces, because it leads to psychic rebirth, because it is the tragic result of a tragic flaw and is confronted with “dignity.” It should not have to be pointed out that the “significance” of a death in a piece of fiction depends not upon the imagination of the critics of that fiction, but rather upon the imagination of the author. And the “simple fact” of death is nothing but a simple fact if nothing is at stake but the “mere” loss of biological life, if the character who dies is nothing but a physical body killed to illustrate this “simple fact.” (24)

Needless to say, the man's death at the end of the story is a fact but it is, of course, arguable whether it is so 'simple' or not. A naturalistic reading of the story may underline that "... humans are cast into an existence over which they have no control, and their inherent failings and a disinterested but 'implacable' Nature will always conjoin to produce disaster"(Adams, 27). Similarly, from the Darwinian perspective, "... the man dies because he is not biologically fit to live" (Adams, 27).Such a naturalistic perspective towards the character's death is very simplistic, indeed, but not so satisfying because it is not a physics experiment in which a man is taken from his natural surroundings to an extremely cold environment where he freezes to death due to his inability to build a proper fire. What brings him to such a place is not the weird imagination of London who 'sadistically' wishes to witness his victim's desperate efforts to save himself and his touching death but the preference of the author who wants to underline the ambitions of mankind for the exploration and exploitation of the riches of the earth without thinking much about his frail and delicate existence in such cold conditions. As the narrator suggests, his journey to Yukon is to search for "the possibilities of getting out logs in the spring" (London, 921).

Human endeavour for gold, other precious metals and raw material are important elements in the story and the man, of course, is not alone in his search. His plan is to join his friends at the camp by 6 pm and together they will go on with their business. Therefore, it can clearly be understood that the main purpose of his travel is economic expectations rather than an unpreventable desire for adventure, and it is his deliberate choice to travel alone to the camp just for the sake of pragmatic reasons like not losing time rather than his attempt to show how courageous he is.

London's detailed description of the setting and his plain but vivid characterization have a strong impact to lead the reader to a more symbolic reading of the story. Except for the man and the dog, every aspect of the setting, namely the water, the creek, the river and the pass has a name which creates a sense of realism whereas the man without a name seems to represent all humanity. "He was a newcomer in the land" (London, 920) just like the human race who is a relatively newcomer too in his existence on earth, compared to the other non-human beings and entities. Although he is a newcomer, he acts as if he were the owner of the place as well as the dog. He establishes a practical and pragmatic relationship both with the environment and the dog. What he wants to do is not interact with but benefit from the rest of nature with its living and non-living entities. He looks at his watch, tries to measure time and calculate the distance so that he will reach the

camp on time. He is equipped with a state of mind governed by judgement and with man-made things, such as a watch, a matchbox and a pipe that he uses against the forces of nature to protect himself from the extremely cold conditions, but he cannot connect this data to a philosophy: “But all this – the mysterious, far-reaching hairline trail, the absence of sun from the sky, the tremendous cold, and the strangeness and weirdness of it all - made no impression on the man” (London, 920). He cannot connect the physical reality with its possible consequences. According to the narrator, he lacks imagination and is “quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances” (London, 920). For instance, although he knows the temperature is fifty degrees below zero, from this fact he cannot deduce “his frailty as a creature of temperature ... and from there on it did not lead him to the conjectural field of immortality and man’s place in the universe” (London, 921). His attention is directed at the practical aspects of his journey and he uses his skills to avoid the immediate dangers which are likely to arise due to his incongruous presence in such a surrounding under such extreme conditions. Since his basic motivation is purely materialistic, he does not stop for a moment and attempt to have a closer and deeper look at his actions.

By the same token, he displays a variety of male arrogance and vanity by ignoring the old timer’s advice that he should not travel alone in such an extremely cold weather, by calling him “womanish” and by boasting that “[a]ny man who was a man could travel alone” (London, 926). Ironically enough, while being “womanish” could have kept him away from the dangers of the cold and saved his life, he prefers an immature masculine attitude by challenging nature and its forces and pays it with his life. What ecocriticism particularly emphasizes is whether a narrative also focuses on the setting in terms of place and natural elements other than human beings. It is obvious that if he had been “womanish”, he would have taken the extreme cold and possible traps into consideration; however, his antropocentric and masculine mind-set prevent him from thinking and acting in harmony with the natural phenomena.

Similarly, the relationship between the man and the dog is not based on comradeship and solidarity but slavery and interest. As the narrator suggests: “... there was no keen intimacy between the dog and the man. The one was the toil slave of the other, and the only caresses it had ever received were the caresses of the whip lash and of harsh and menacing throat sounds that threatened the whip lash” (London, 924). He compels the dog to go in front of him so that if the ice cracks, the dog would fall into cold water, not himself. When the dog falls into and gets its toes wet and icy, it knows by instinct how

to clean the ice from its toes. However, the man cannot succeed in drying his feet when he later falls into a trap unexpectedly. Hence, he becomes envious of the dog for sitting warmly in this bitterly cold nature and plans to kill it, warm his hands in its carcass, build another fire and save himself from death. But he fails to do all these due to his frozen hands and this failure hints at how frail the existence of mankind is on earth in spite of his capacity of judgement and reasoning, and his use of equipment. In the end, nature wins over culture, the man realizes his inevitable doom and acknowledges the old man's advice.

Although the man seems to be the protagonist of the story, it would not be an exaggeration to mention the dog and extreme cold among its central characters. The objective and omniscient voice of the narrator does not side with any of these three figures and treats all equally. In this sense, it is quite appropriate to say that London prefers to reject an anthropocentric approach to be able to balance the weight of the three entities of nature: the man, the dog, and the extreme cold. As Peterson states: "Extreme cold is a metaphor for a whole range of experiences beyond the man's awareness, and the point of the story is not that the man freezes to death but that he has been confronted with the inadequacy of his conception of the nature of things" (4). The dog's survival after the man's death and its move to the camp with the expectation of finding other "food providers and fire providers" (London, 931) is further suggestion of London's challenge to anthropocentrism.

Hence, on a symbolic basis the man is travelling alone in his adventure of overcoming and dominating the other forces of nature. While challenging the extreme weather and landscape conditions, his so-called alliance with the dog does not reflect the features of sincere solidarity but displays the utilitarian and pragmatic dominance of the former on the latter. Similarly, his treatment of the old timer and his notion of women hints how shallow and insubstantial his perception of human existence on earth is. In other words, he is quite an intelligent human being in his daily, short term and transitory endeavor for survival; on the other hand, he is pathetically and vaingloriously incapable of comprehending how intricate and interdependent the conditions of his survival are. His inevitable and tragic death, to conclude, may unmistakably be linked, in a larger context, to the inevitable and tragic end of the human race if he insists on dominating over nature.

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