

## Three Perspectives of “To Build a Fire”

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### Introduction

Jack London's “To Build a Fire” is an interesting short story. Just by looking at the title, you would never know that this story is about a desperate man's life and death struggle centered on building a fire. The title presents a peaceful and leisurely disguise, however, it is soon revealed that this is quite the opposite, rather, a terrifying story.

As the story advances, the meaning of “fire” becomes more intensified: it gradually changes from the mere fire into, literally, the man's fight for life itself. Where he is traveling, in the cold region of the Klondike, a world of fifty degrees below zero, the fire is not only the means to keep him warm or to thaw his bacon sandwich but is crucial for him to ensure his survival. The absence of fire, therefore, is directly linked to his own freezing to death, which the reader will soon notice after witnessing his desperate attempts at building a fire.

As the title of this paper implies, “three perspectives” or viewpoints seem to exist in this story. One is the perspective of the man, the main character in this story and the other two are those of the old man in Sulphur Creek, and thirdly, of a dog which the man took along with him. Respectively, those perspectives represent three different characteristics, such as the first man, practical but less imaginative, the old man, experienced, and the dog, instinctive.

### I The Man

The man is described as “(being) without imagination.” It further states that “He was quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances.” (p. 893) Jack London writes using the phrase when he introduces the man, “The trouble with him was . . .” The word “trouble” indicates something bad will be happening resulting from this man's personality. He lacks imagination. That means he is not good at planning or preparing for the future. Because he lacks imagination, he cannot think of the worst, cannot apprehend the possible danger he might face when traveling alone in the cold region of the Klondike.

On the other hand, he seems to be good at doing practical things. One example is his lunch. He brought it, wrapping it in his handkerchief and carrying it next to his naked body. In that way he kept it from freezing. Also, he prepared his bacon sandwich with enough bacon

grease so that it would give him extra energy in the cold. He was careful too. He observed the ground well in order to see where he should place his feet. If he noticed any changes or curves in the creek, he stopped, stepped back, and changed his route. He knew the dangers hidden in those places. The layers of ice and snow, though covered, often pooled water beneath. And the depth of water could never be known with certainty. Once you broke through, you might become wet up to the waist. If you were lucky enough, you would only get wet feet.

In such a cold region, however, getting wet means, at least, certain delay. Since he wanted to see his boys around six at the camp in Henderson, he did not want any delay. Considering the coldness, he could not afford delay, either. Yet if you got wet, you needed to stop and build a fire to dry your socks and shoes whether you liked it or not. You had to build a fire, and under protection of the fire you would be able to dry them. You had to do them quickly and methodically, otherwise the numbness would seize you right away. The man was well aware of those dangers of getting wet, therefore, when he found that he was making four miles per hour, he was much satisfied with his speed. He calculated he could see his boys at the camp by six o'clock for sure. In his calculations, the boys would meet him there, a fire would be going and a hot supper would be ready. From the viewpoint of the immediate, practical things, he could calculate this way. His calculation thus would work under ordinary circumstances in ordinary places.

His lack of imagination does not allow him to think further. We, human beings are frail; we are only able to live within certain degrees of temperature. Henderson Creek, where he was traveling alone is a world of ice and snow, a world of fifty or even more degrees below zero. Very vividly the intense coldness is depicted in the man's amber beard, ice-muzzled mouth and the creeping numbness in his hand and legs. There is plenty to fear. Jack London writes realistically about the man's amber beard which was caused by chewing tobacco. The man was not able to clear his chin due to the muzzle of ice which held his lips so rigidly. Every time he spit tobacco juice, the juice dripped onto his bearded jaw. As a result, the amber crystals increased under his chin.

Creeping numbness is another way London tells us of the extraordinary coldness. While walking, the man always rubs his cheekbones and nose with his mittened hands. He does this automatically but the instant he stops rubbing, his cheekbones go numb and next his nose. In only 15 seconds, he exposes his fingers to take his lunch out from under his jacket, then the numbness takes a hold of his fingers. Without putting the mitten back on, he has to strike the fingers sharply against his legs in order to get the blood circulating again. When he sits down on a log to eat his lunch, his toes instantly go numb in his moccasin shoes. In this cold, it seems that he is not allowed to stop moving. He keeps moving to make his blood run through his body, otherwise he will freeze. It is a terrifying world.

The man notices the coldness, however, the temperature does not really matter to him. Actually, he takes a roundabout course to see about the possibilities of getting logs in the spring from the islands in the Yukon. This clearly shows the man's practicality and

shrewdness in life, his better sides, and so it seems he will be all right as long as a fire is secured. Early on he is walking four miles per hour, and is pretty sure that he will see his boys by dinner time. He is confident. Being encouraged by smooth progress, he even celebrates his lunch.

He is successful in building a fire in his first try. He gets his firewood "from the undergrowth, where high water of the previous spring had lodged a supply of seasoned twigs." (p.896) Though he is astonished that numbness has hit him so fast and though he has to thaw out his ice-muzzle first to open his mouth to bite his sandwich, he can eat lunch all right, within the protection of the fire.

Half an hour after he resumes walking, it happens. At a place where there are no signs of any danger on the surface, he breaks through the ice and gets wet halfway to the knees. He is angry at first. Being alert as he is, he should not let that kind of thing happen. He thinks of building a fire right away. Once he decides, he is quick. From the top of the bank, he starts collecting dry firewood, sticks and twigs, branches, and last-year's dry grasses. Taking a small shred of birch bark out of his pocket, he is again successful in making a fire. Soon the fire is beginning to burn. He is safe.

Then another thing happens. It happens a little later when he is feeling glad about having been able to build the fire and is about to remove his shoes to dry. Because it is convenient for him to pull the twigs from the brush, he builds the fire under the spruce tree, upon the boughs of which lay a lot of snow. Each time he pulls a twig, a slight agitation to the tree is wrought, which he hardly notices. The heated air ascends to the top of the tree making the snow melt, one bough after another like an avalanche, the snow falls without warning upon the man, and upon the fire. The fire is blotted out, and is gone.

The man is shocked. "It was as though he had just heard his own sentence of death" (p. 898). From this time on, the man's desperate attempts to build a fire start to intensify. It is a battle against time. Fighting against the fear of death, he tries to keep calm, otherwise he will easily panic. Collecting twigs again, he concentrates on building a fire for the third time. This time, in an open space, for sure. He learns that the fire means life, and it must not perish.

With his numbed fingers, he awkwardly moves about. He has to use his eyes to determine whether his fingers are holding the twigs or not. He cannot feel them when he touches them. After he scoops up the matches he dropped on the snow, he has to tear one using his teeth, and scratches it on his leg. He finally succeeds in lighting it. He holds it with his teeth up to the birch bark, but the burning brimstone goes up his nostrils and into his lungs. When he coughs, the match falls into the snow and goes out.

Then, once again he tries to light the matches. This time, he holds the whole bunch of matches between the heels of his hands. Then along his leg, he scratches. Seventy sulphur matches flare into flame at once. His flesh is burning, but he cannot feel it. He can smell it, however. He endures and holds them until he cannot put up with the pain any more. When the birch bark is lit again, he seems successful, but the rotten wood and green moss which his

numbed hands had collected are hard to burn. The undesirable moisture contained in the twigs begins to weaken the fire. First it is a blazing fire, then with a sizzling sound, it goes out again for good.

A wild idea occurs to him. With his knife, he can kill his dog, and puts his dead hands into the dog's warm body until sensation returns to his hands. The man gets on his hands and knees and crawls forward to the dog. He succeeds in catching the dog. But with his completely numbed hands he can neither use his knife to kill the dog nor strangle it. How funny it is, he thinks, that to locate his hands he has to look down. They are dangling like some weights, at the ends of his arms.

It is no longer just a matter of his fingers and toes freezing, or even of losing them, but it is a matter of life and death. He becomes panicked, and starts running blindly, like "a chicken with its head cut off" (p.901). Then he falls down. Realizing that he cannot do anything any more, he faces his own death with dignity. Then peace of mind comes when he is getting ready for his death, and at the same time drowsiness comes to him. He thinks that freezing to death is not such a bad way to die. Freezing is like taking anesthesia. There are a lot of worse ways to die.

## II The Old Man in Sulphur Creek

The old man is remembered from time to time by the man in the previous section. This old man represents experience and wisdom as well. Depending upon the man's states of mind, his evaluation of the old man changes. Actually, the changes occur four times based on the man's success and failure at building a fire.

First, when the man acknowledges the cold in the region himself, he remembers the old man once said that it sometimes gets extremely cold in the country. The man agrees with the old man, thinking that he indeed told the truth then. This first occasion of remembering the old man comes when the man starts preparing to build a fire for his lunch break. In this situation, the man remembers the old man quite comfortably, probably because he is successful in building a fire with the first try. Also, since the man is satisfied with his speed of making four miles per hour in this cold region, he can afford to think of the old man in Sulphur Creek with pleasure. Appreciating and agreeing with the old man's words, he is relaxed, calm, and can even afford time to enjoy his pipe after lunch.

One aspect of the old man's wisdom is that it is gained through long experience. It seems that the old man's wisdom parallels the man's alertness and practicality. The man is alert and quick to act, but lacks profound thinking. Being without imagination means however practical he is, his practicality does not compensate for what he lacks, especially in an area where emergencies can happen any minute. When he recognizes one, it might be too late. On the other hand, though the movement of the old man is slow, he is able to save himself, because he is careful in his planning. From the beginning, the old man refuses to travel alone

like this man. Further, the old man's long experience tells him the possible dangers he might meet beforehand. While the confidence in the man's practicality tends to move him to frivolity which leads him to worsen his situation, the old man's experience seems a lot worthier. Indeed, compared with the old man's experience and wisdom, the man's practicality is fragile.

For the second time, the man remembers the old man. The man becomes wet, yet he is able to manage to build a fire to dry out his shoes and socks. Because of success at building a fire this second time, he can still afford to smile. Although he is a little annoyed at being late arriving to the camp, he is still calm. Remembering the old man's advice, he smiles and thinks that although the old man is serious about traveling alone in the Klondike in under fifty degree below weather, the man can save himself, and at least he remains calm. The man was alone and had an accident in getting wet. "So what?", he thinks. As long as he stays calm, he can save himself, there is nothing to worry about. Being a little elated, he even makes fun of the old man. He concludes that these old-timers are rather womanish.

The third time when the man remembers the old man comes soon afterwards. The next stage of the story, when it happens, brings about a drastic, dynamic change and the reader is taken to the striking climax. Just after the man boasts about himself and makes a joke about the old man in Sulphur Creek being womanish, the fire is blotted out by the snow falling from the spruce tree. Perhaps the old-timer on Sulphur Creek is right, he thinks. For the first time, the man feels weak. And from this time on, the story becomes tense. This time, the third time, the fire is slow to come. The more he freezes, the harder it is for him to move around. Once the fire seems started, but despite the man's desperate efforts, it goes out, and never returns. Apparently, the man is discouraged. He begins to get panicky.

As the man's tension intensifies, his attitude toward the old man changes. All through the time of building a fire, ceaseless cold hits him, and with the shock of the helpless numbness attacking his extremities, the man confirms that the old man on Sulphur Creek is completely right. In this controlled despair, he, for the first time, admits this and regrets. The man not only remembers the advice from the old man that after fifty degrees below, a man should travel with a partner, but also, at last he understands what it means. His admittance which was gained after the failure to build a fire costs him his life.

Just before the man dies, he remembers the old man the fourth time. On this occasion, the man mumbles to the old man of Sulphur Creek, "You were right, old boss; you were right." (p.902). For the first time he recognizes his loss against the experienced old man. Through the various stages centering around building a fire, the man communicates with the old man, and each time his evaluation is different. Once he chuckled, agreed, joked. Then, when he calls the old man "boss," respect toward experience seems to have come to him.

### III The Dog

The third viewpoint in this story is embodied in the dog. Unlike the human beings, the dog has an instinct which senses danger. In the wilderness of nature, as if being recalled by and returned to the nature of its ancestor, the wolf, the dog's existence in this story represents the third viewpoint.

The dog which the man is traveling with is "a big native husky, the proper wolf-dog, gray-coated and without any visible or temperamental difference from its brother, the wild wolf." (p.893). Even this kind of dog is depressed by the tremendous cold. His instinct warns that it is no time for traveling. His instinct makes him question why not the man seeks shelter somewhere, why not the man builds a fire. His instinct, in other words, is enough to feel this cold is menacing.

Once the dog gets its forefeet and legs wet. Though the dog's instinct makes it resist doing this, this happens when the man compells the dog to go in front of him to see if the footing is all right. The water that clings to its forefeet and legs turns to ice immediately. The dog licks the ice off its legs, and begins biting out the ice that forms between its toes. The dog simply is obeying its instinct. Although the animal does not know the information about the temperature that the man knows, its instinct tells it what to do.

The process of knowing and learning between human beings and animals as shown here seems to be completely different. Men can "know" the information from a book, but can't "learn" it until he experiences it. While the dog does not "know" any information from books, it can directly "learn" it, with the help of instinct. When the man resumes walking after his lunch, the dog reluctantly follows, thinking the man is ignorant of the real cold, while the dog knows, and all its ancestors know and it has inherited the knowledge. In a dog's world, knowing and learning is the same, while it is different for human beings.

Nevertheless, the only reason the dog follows the man is the dog's expectation that food and shelter will appear. It is not its loyalty toward the man that causes it to follow. The relationship between the man and the dog in this story contradicts the long-told relationship between a man and a dog that we know:

"... 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. So the dog made no effort to communicate its apprehension to the man." (p.896).

Unfriendliness is clear enough from this quotation. If the relationship were friendly, the situation might have been a little different, because the man could expect a certain loyalty from the dog. For this dog, however, the food provider could be anybody, not necessarily this

particular man.

We witness their unfriendly relationship comes to a climax, when the man tries to catch the dog to strangle it to death. In order to recover warmth for his hands, the man tries to kill the dog. He wants to kill the dog and bury his hands in the warm carcass until his hands recover from numbness. Yet the dog notices the funny posture of the man. The man crawls on his hands and knees toward the dog. The dog senses this to be unusual. It is enough to excite the dog's suspicion. It is also weird for the man to speak to the dog in a voice with a strange note of fear, which the dog has never heard 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." (p.900). Tamed as it appears, the dog senses the danger, and will not move. He never comes near the man however tenderly the man calls to it. After standing on his feet, he once again calls to it. When the man takes his usual posture, the dog's suspicion is slightly lessened. Yet still, the dog does not move toward the man.

Yet, ironically enough, the dog reacts when the man speaks to it with the sound of whiplashes in his voice. The dog, with customary allegiance, obeys the man and comes to him. The dog is caught, but the man's uncontrolled hands cannot kill the dog. All that the man can do is to encircle it and sit in the snow holding the snarling, struggling dog. At last, the dog is released, and it ruthlessly observes the man from far away. When it smells the scent of death from the man, it turns and runs to somebody else, the other food provider, the other fire provider. The ruthlessness of the animal is quite adequately shown. At first it follows the man from its usual tameness, but in the end, it betrays him. The dog only helps itself, never concerned about the man's welfare.

## Conclusion

We have seen the story from three different perspectives; that of the man, the old man in Sulphur Creek, and the dog. Focusing upon these different viewpoints, the same scenes look different. Thus, Jack London enables this very short story of only 11 pages to expand as the reader begins to appreciate the various viewpoints.

The man symbolizes practicality, trying to deal with each problem one by one when it occurs. He is forced to cope with trouble when it happens because he lacks the imagination to see ahead. The old man in Sulphur Creek, on the other hand, is symbolic of experience. Since he went through some danger in the past, he was able to acquire it in exchange for his youth. What he says or what advice the old man gives might be bothersome to the younger man and often taken unseriously, but all that the old man can do is share his experience.

Then last, the dog's viewpoint comes. Though its instinct is far better than that of man's, the dog usually hides it, pretending that it is tamed. The dog, however, can become a wild wolf suddenly, when stimulated by wintry weather. The brute, in a different atmosphere

from what it is used to, remembers its own wildness. Jack London, adept in writing about these particular environments in the Yukon territory in Alaska, skillfully depicts the world of the whiteness of ice and snow, quietness of the trails, and darkness due to the absence of the sun, spreading out this mysterious world before us

#### Reference

The text used here is from *The American Tradition in Literature*, Ed. Perkins, Bradley, Beatty, and Long, Sixth Edition, Volume Two (New York: Random House, 1956, pp.892-902).