

To Build a Fire



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JACK LONDON

Jack London was born in 1876 to a mother who had attempted to commit suicide during her pregnancy. His biological father's identity is unconfirmed. Some believe, as Jack London's mother reported, that she became pregnant by astrologer William Chaney whose demand that she have an abortion caused her suicide attempt. When London was a baby, his mother married the man whose name he carries: John London. The family moved to Oakland, California. At age 13, London began to work 12 to 18 hours per day at the local cannery. Seeking escape from this backbreaking work, London went to sea as an oyster pirate and then on a sealing schooner. He returned to Oakland to attend high school, and at 17 hoped to attend college at the University of California, Berkeley and become a writer. He started college, but had to leave due to financial circumstances and never graduated. At 21, he followed the Klondike Gold Rush to seek his fortune in the Yukon, where he worked harder than ever. London returned to California in 1898 with a deep appreciation for nature, in its beauty and brutality, and a wealth of material to fuel his writing, and by the early 1900s was making a living off the income from the writing he published. He published his most famous novel, *Call of the Wild*, in 1903 and was soon wealthy and well-known. Jack London married twice: first, Bessie Maddern in 1900, although the pair divorced in 1904. London then married Charmian Kittredge in 1905. In the same year, London purchased a ranch in Glen Ellen, California. The ranch was very important to London and he wrote and published many popular stories, especially after 1910, with the intention of financially supporting the ranch. London died at the ranch on November 22, 1916 after struggling with various health issues including dysentery, alcoholism, and uremia. Because he was prescribed morphine for his extreme pain at the end of his life, rumors and speculation have continued to surround his death as a possible suicide.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The turn-of-the-century was a time of social and economic change. Social classes and the stratification of rich and poor were changing dramatically with the advent of new technological advancements and shifting social awareness. One economic event that directly shaped Jack London's life was the Klondike Gold Rush, which he joined in 1897 at the age of 21. Born poor, London had worked hard throughout his youth, but his time with the Gold Rush exposed him to even harsher conditions. Growing up in Oakland, California had provided him

with the political ideas of socialism, as well as a personal desire to escape poverty. He saw his writing as a ticket to a different type of life that would allow him social and economic mobility. Throughout his life, London was a strong advocate for the liberal politics he was exposed to in Oakland. He was a member of a radical intellectual group in San Francisco called "The Crowd." The group advocated for socialism, unionism, and the rights of workers. London cared about animal activism, as well, hoping to improve the conditions for animals and for lowly laborers that were horrific in many places at the turn-of-the-century. Rights for workers and better working conditions were slowly changing to catch up with the economic prosperity of industrialization.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Jack London's "To Build A Fire" is considered one of the most exemplary texts of the Naturalism movement in literature. Naturalism spanned the years of the 1880s through the 1930s. A subcategory of Realism, Naturalism argued that environment, both natural and social, created inescapable conditions that shaped characters and lives. Realism reacted against the idealism of the earlier Romanticism movement in seeking to portray everyday life and working-class characters. Naturalist works often focus on darker elements of human experience, revealing poverty, violence, and human vice through fiction. Other Naturalist authors and works that exhibit the pessimism and determinism of London's piece include: Thomas Hardy's novels, namely "Tess of The D'Urbervilles" (1891); the works of Émile Zola, such as "The Human Beast" (1890); Edith Wharton's bleak novel "Ethan Frome" (1911); and pieces by Stephen Crane, including "The Open Boat" (1897) and "The Red Badge of Courage" (1895).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** To Build A Fire
- **When Written:** Revised between 1902 and 1908
- **Where Written:** Jack London's ranch in Glen Ellen, California
- **When Published:** 1908
- **Literary Period:** Naturalism (Realism)
- **Genre:** Fiction
- **Setting:** The Yukon Trail, Canada
- **Climax:** Snow suddenly falls from a tree and puts out the man's fire he built after falling into the water. From that point onward, his rapidly freezing body prevents any attempts at survival.
- **Antagonist:** Nature, cold weather

- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

1902 version. An early version of “To Build A Fire” was published in 1902 in a magazine called *The Youth Companion*. In that version, the man survives.

Film adaptations. Four film adaptations of the short story have been released, including an animated version (2016), a perhaps surprising choice for a grim story that ends in death.



PLOT SUMMARY

In northern Canada, a solitary hiker and his dog depart from **the main Yukon trail**. At the end of their day hike, the man will be reunited with his traveling companions, who he refers to as “**the boys**,” at the Henderson Camp. The man is a newcomer to this area and unfamiliar with the extreme cold temperatures. A weather forecast of fifty degrees below zero does not mean much to the man, who is competent but lacks imagination. Such extreme temperatures promise discomfort, but do not cause him to reflect on the risks, his own death, and his role in the natural world.

The man, therefore, thinks very little as he walks, considering only his destination for the evening, and his lunch, which he carries inside his jacket against his skin to keep it from freezing. He chews tobacco as he walks, and his spit freezes in an icicle from his mouth in the extreme cold. The temperature is, in fact, seventy-five degrees below zero.

The dog’s natural instincts tell it that it is unsafe to travel in these weather conditions. The dog is anxious. It feels it should curl up beneath the snow and wait out the cold. It expects the man to do the same: stop traveling and build a **fire**.

As the man walks, he is looking carefully for places where the ice and snow might conceal hidden water. The creek he follows is frozen solid, but streams run from the hillsides under the snow and these small pools can be liquid even in the coldest temperature. Falling through the ice and getting wet would be dangerous and would delay his travel because he would need to stop to build a fire to warm himself.

He shies away from a place where he feels the ice move. Once, sensing danger, he sends the dog over a patch of ice first. The dog falls through and the water on its feet and legs freezes instantly. The dog chews the ice from between its toes. It does not know the consequences of frozen feet, but it is directed by its survival instinct to remove the ice.

The man arrives at a divide in the creek where he stops to eat his lunch. In the few minutes that he removes his mittens his hands grow numb. He realizes he cannot feel his toes and feet, and the ice frozen around his mouth in his beard obstructs his

eating. He laughs at his own foolishness; he forgot to first build a fire to warm himself.

He remembers meeting an **old man at Sulphur Creek** who gave him traveling and safety advice. He had scoffed at the man’s stories of the cold temperatures, but now acknowledges that the man was right: it is extremely cold. He builds a fire, melts the ice from his face, and eats his lunch. The dog sits near the fire enjoying the warmth. When the man moves on, the dog does not want to leave the fire, drawn to its safety.

For half an hour, the man does not observe any telltale signs of water under the snow. Then, without warning, the ice breaks and he falls through. He is soaked to the knees. He curses the delay, but knows he must stop to build a fire and dry his clothes, another piece of instruction from the old man at Sulphur Creek.

The man gathers wood and constructs his fire among some pine trees at the top of a bank. He moves carefully, understanding that he needs to be successful at his first attempt to build a fire.

As the fire roars to life, the man congratulates himself on proving the old man at Sulphur Creek wrong. The old man had cautioned that no one should travel alone in temperatures of fifty degrees below zero. And yet, the man had provided for himself even after an accident. Any man should be able to do the same, he believes.

The man starts to remove his frozen moccasins, when, suddenly, snow falls from the pine trees above onto the man and his fire. The man had disturbed the snow piled on the trees as he gathered wood for his fire, and the heat from the fire had done the same. The fire is smothered in an instant.

The man is shocked, but he starts to rebuild his fire out in the open, wishing for a companion who could have helped him in this situation.

The man reaches into his pocket for the tree bark he uses to light a fire, but he cannot grasp it, or tell where it is, because his fingers have grown numb and lost all feeling. He puts on his mittens and beats his hands in an attempt to restore feeling. He looks jealously at the dog, which is protected by its body’s natural resources. Eventually the man retrieves the tree bark, but he cannot handle the matches. He drops the pack and individual matches. He lights one match by holding it in his mouth, but the smoke in his nose causes him to drop the match into the snow.

The man can only hold the full pack of matches between numb hands, so, in desperation, he strikes the whole pack at once. He can smell his flesh burning as he holds the lit bundle of matches to the tree bark. Once the bark is lit, he drops the burning bundle into the snow. He carefully adds grasses and wood to the small flame, which promises life. He realizes that he will lose some fingers and toes, even if he is able to build a second fire. But his numb hands are clumsy and he scatters the coals of the fire, extinguishing it.

The sight of the dog inspires a crazy idea. The man heard of a man who survived a winter storm by killing an animal and crawling inside the corpse for warmth. He thinks that he could kill the dog, warm his hands inside its body, and try again to build a fire. The man catches the dog by wrapping his arms around it, but realizes he physically cannot kill it. His hands cannot grasp his knife.

The man realizes now that the situation has become one of life or death. In a panic, he begins to run down the trail. He imagines that he could run far enough to reach the camp and the boys who could save him. But he lacks the endurance for running, and his frozen feet and legs have lost all feeling. He stumbles and falls, then runs again. Eventually he lies in the snow, resting.

The thought that more and more of his body is freezing soon sends the man running again. After the last time he falls, the man sits quietly, reflecting on meeting his death with dignity. He thinks that he has been running around ridiculously rather than accepting the inevitable. He grows sleepy. He imagines the boys finding his body on the trail the next day. He feels separate from himself, and looks at his body in the snow from the boys' perspective. He murmurs aloud to the old man at Sulphur Creek that he was right: no man should travel alone in these temperatures.

Finally, the man falls into a peaceful sleep. The dog watches the man, puzzled by his inactivity, until, moving closer, it smells death. The dog howls, while evening arrives and stars appear in the sky. Eventually, the dog turns and runs down the trail toward the camp where it seeks fire and food provided by other humans.



CHARACTERS

The man – The protagonist is a lone hiker on a side trail in the Yukon Territories. His age and other physical details included are not provided. He seems to be a young adult to middle-aged. He has a beard and is in good physical condition. Despite his self-confidence in his hiking abilities, he does not seem to be a very experienced hiker, as he ignores the advice of **the old man at Sulphur Creek** about traveling on such a cold day. While he is practical and resourceful and both competent and rational, he is not a “thinker” and passes his time walking without any deep thoughts or particular appreciation of the landscape he passes through. He is also not imaginative, and because of that seems not to have much of a sense of the possibilities or consequences that can arise either from his actions or by chance. He reacts with initial calm and confidence when he falls in the water and then loses his **fire**, but as the situation unravels he first panics and then falls into resignation. His generic personality and characters traits (with the exceptions of his lack of his imagination and his over-confidence) and his

lack of a name seem to allow him to be a stand in for many different types of people. The reader, therefore, might imagine him or herself in the protagonist's situation.

The dog – The man's traveling companion is a wolf-like dog with a gray coat, an animal native to the area, and described as not so different from a wild wolf. The dog, unlike the man, does not want to travel on such a cold day, knowing instinctively that it ought to hide and wait out the bitter cold. The dog operates based on instinct. When its feet get wet, the dog quickly chews away the ice forming between his toes. It does not do this because it knows the consequences of frozen feet, but because its deep instinct instructs it to do so. Likewise, the dog relies on the man only because the man provides warmth and food. At the end of the story, once the dog smells death as he approaches the man's body, the dog abandons the body to find other humans in the camp. The dog's relationship with the man is shown to be impersonal and unemotional. The dog is incapable of caring about the man. His character, such as it is, is defined by instinct for survival.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



INSTINCTUAL KNOWLEDGE VS. SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

Jack London's short story is an example of Naturalism, a literary movement that focuses on the realism of human experiences, and often engages with the broad theme of “man versus nature.” London's unique take on this larger literary idea is through the topic of knowledge. Two types of knowledge are discussed throughout the short story: instinctual knowledge and scientific knowledge. The first is associated with the dog and the second with the man. These two figures represent a larger distinction between nature and humans. The dog cannot understand or reason, but his instincts direct his survival throughout the story. The man, on the other hand, relies on information gained from others, on logic, and on tools and technologies (matches and a knife). This scientific or rational knowledge clouds the man's instinctual knowledge, and gives him confidence in his ability to protect himself from the natural elements with the resource of **fire**. Because of this confidence, he ignores the dog's instinctual knowledge that the weather is too cold to safely travel. In this way, the man is presented as separate from nature, and distant from his biological instinct for survival, because he understands the world scientifically rather than instinctually. Ultimately, the

conclusion of the story shows a triumph of instinctual knowledge and trust in one's nature over confidence in logic and reason, as do other Naturalist texts.



CHANCE AND HUMAN ERROR

The man's initial mistake of traveling alone in weather that is far too cold for independent hiking does not ensure his fate of freezing to death. The gradual deterioration of the man's conditions involves both chance and human error. The man is careful and prepared for the streams of water under the snow that will soak him and threaten his survival. Yet, he stumbles into an unexpected stream that was essentially invisible before he fell into it. This shows that even a prepared and observant person may fall prey to chance. When the man builds a **fire**, it is extinguished by snow falling from a pine tree, an devastating accident that is both human error and chance: the man could have been more cautious, but the snow might not have accumulated in that area, and might not have fallen in such a way as to put out the fire entirely. The interaction of chance and human error creates the chain of events leading to the man's death. This theme demonstrates that London's Naturalism does not prescribe "fault" to either nature or humans, only acknowledging the error in underestimating the power of chance to provide unaccounted for circumstances.



FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL VS. ACCEPTANCE OF DEATH

As the man's situation deteriorates, his emotional state oscillates between determination and acceptance. In certain moments, he seems to foresee his approaching death and in other moments he seems to have faith in his survival. These shifting reactions represent universal human themes of optimism and denial. When the snow falls on his **fire**, the man's initial shock reflects his certainty of his death, but his calm reaction and productive response seem optimistic. As a living being, he instinctively wants to continue to live, and so he refuses to give up, and fights for his survival. As he repeatedly drops the matches, he attempts to innovate. When the matches fail, his thoughts quickly turn to the price he'd pay for survival: killing the dog to warm his hands. This thinking reflects a man in a desperate situation, forced to think quickly and willing to kill for his own survival. After he is unable to kill the dog, a "certain fear of death" comes over him. This fear causes him to panic and run, an act of desperation. His repeated running and falling shows the back-and-forth between his fight and his acceptance. His final fall triggers his acceptance of death and he sits in the snow, waiting. His final imaginative visions resemble accounts of near-death experiences by survivors of such situations. The shifts between the man's perspective on his life and death, his need to struggle and his stages of acceptance, reflect the larger

aspects of Realism in London's work. The story traces the internal response of any human to a life-and-death situation, engaging with universal ideas of how humans react with fear and acceptance.



THE POWER OF IMAGINATION

Early in the story, the man is identified as not being a "thinker" and as "unimaginative." He is aware of the world around him and of the terrible cold, but he does not imagine the possible outcomes of this cold. Because the man eventually dies due to his initial mistake of traveling on such a cold day, his failure to imagine possible outcomes of his choice is linked to his inability to survive. Imagination could have saved his life. This theme connects to the theme of Chance and Human Error, as several of the man's errors seem linked to his inability to imagine the outcome, as when he builds a **fire** under a snowy tree, or strikes all the matches at once, with dreadful consequences. Had he been more imaginative, more open to the possibilities of what could result from his actions and from the terrible cold, he might have avoided these mistakes.

At the end of the story, in the moments of the man's death, his imagination suddenly flourishes. He imagines **the boys** finding his body in the snow, and he contemplates the certainty of his own death. These imaginative acts are linked to his acceptance of his death. Before, when the man was focused on survival, he considered only the resources at his disposal and what they could achieve. Once he accepts his death, he begins to imagine and to imaginatively apply the wisdom of **the old man at Sulphur Creek** (that no one should hike alone in weather below 50 degrees) to his own situation.



INDIFFERENT NATURE

Throughout the story, the natural world is presented as unemotional and unaware of the fate of the man. This literary depiction of nature reflects Naturalism's understanding of a harsh, yet realistic natural world. Contrary to other literary movements, Naturalism views nature without sentiment and without projecting human characteristics of love, care, and agency onto the natural world. This understanding of nature is clearly embodied in the character of the dog that is indifferent to the man and his fate. To the dog, the man is a source of food and protection only, and not a companion. The dog cannot feel any emotion about the death of the man, and the dog quickly seeks out other humans who will provide the food and shelter it needs. One human is indistinguishable from another in the dog's mind. Many people who emphasize a unique connection between a specific human and a specific animal view dogs and other pets sentimentally. Therefore, the relationship, or lack thereof, between the man and the dog in this story effectively communicates London's theme of the indifference of nature. Naturalism rejects the

literary movement Transcendentalism, an influential philosophy in American thought, which emphasized unique connections between nature and humanity and focused on the souls of humans as open to the influence of nature as a spiritual force.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE MAIN YUKON TRAIL

The story begins with the man's departure from the main Yukon Trail onto a little-traveled trail that will lead to his destination. This departure off the main trail symbolizes a transition and a risk. Previously, the man has traveled on the main trail and previously he has traveled with companions, **the boys**. The main trail symbolizes security and certainty, and the departure from this foreshadows the dangers the man will face. A trail is a man-made construction through nature. The relationship between man and nature is critical in this short story, and the concept of the trail implies the presence of other humans, as well as the rational thinking behind map-making and navigation. A trail allows man to survive in nature and to adjust the wilderness to his expectations and his needs. The main Yukon Trail symbolizes man's ability to conquer and navigate through nature. The man leaves this trail, and the resources of other humans, behind.



THE BOYS

"The boys" are how the man refers to his traveling companions who he'll meet up with at the end of a day of solo travel. The boys, who never appear within the space of the story, but who repeatedly appear in the man's thoughts, function as a symbol, rather than as characters. This generic group represents many things to the man: his destination, security, comfort, and companionship. His focus on the boys evolves over the course of the story as his circumstances change. He looks forward to reaching the boys. He is disappointed when he stumbles into the water because it will delay his arrival at the camp to meet the boys. He imagines the boys finding his dead body and feels, as he dies, that he no longer belongs in their group. The boys symbolize an unattainable goal of "civilization," a space that is controlled by humans. The man is not with the boys because he is in nature, alone. Nature, the opposite of the boys, presents physical threats, isolation, and indifference.



THE OLD MAN AT SULPHUR CREEK

Like **the boys**, the old man at Sulphur Creek is a

character used repeatedly throughout the story as a symbol. The man thinks often about this old man who gave him the advice that no man should travel alone if it's colder than 50 degrees below zero. The man first scoffs at this advice when he is able to make a **fire** and fend for himself. Later on, he admits the accuracy of the old man's advice as his circumstances deteriorate and he acknowledges his own imminent death. The old man bridges the gap between humans and nature because he has a healthy respect for the threat that nature presents. He also seems to understand the natural world in more instinctual ways, as the dog does, and he does not believe mankind can rely on his resources for survival. The man, on the other hand, begins his journey with a false confidence in his rationality and human-made resources, unable to admit that there might be a situation—a day that's too cold—which he could not conquer.



FIRE

Fire means the difference between life and death in a setting as cold and bleak as the one presented in London's story. The title of the story also keys the reader into the important role of fire in the story. The goal of the protagonist is to build a fire, and as he fails in this later in the story, the man attempts desperate measures to achieve this goal: like lighting all his matches at once, or attempting to kill the dog. Fire is repeatedly associated with life and protection through the word choice of the story. The man's first successful fire, which he builds when he eats his lunch, helps to establish its importance early on. Even when nothing has gone wrong, the man needs a fire to survive. His body, unlike the dog's body, does not have the natural resources necessary to survive intense cold without a fire. Building a fire is an act of technical skill and technology, and fire in literature has also often been used as a symbol of knowledge. The building of a fire thus symbolizes life in the story, but also life through human knowledge, skill, and technology. And the failure of the man to build a fire is the failure of these things, as expressed in the man, and in the brutal cold of nature.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Bantam Classics edition of *To Build a Fire and Other Stories* published in 1986.

To Build A Fire Quotes

☞ The trouble with him was that he was without imagination. He was quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances.

Related Characters: The man

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

The main character in this story, a solitary hiker on the Yukon trail, is new to the area, yet unafraid of the cold day on which he hikes. This quote explains why the man isn't afraid of the cold: he isn't able to imagine the potential consequences of the extreme cold. Many people might, when faced with an unusual situation, focus on the future by imagining the worst that could happen. To consider the worst that could happen requires imagination, which is the ability to speculate about the future or about seemingly unlikely events.

While the man doesn't have much imagination, he has other abilities: rational thinking and strong practical knowledge about how to survive in the wilderness. These are the "things of life" mentioned in the quote. The man is realistic and trusts in his practical survival skills. It's implied that this self-confidence is one reason why the man doesn't have an imagination—he focuses on immediate events, rather than imagining possibilities. The quote therefore suggests that the man's awareness of the "things of life" isn't everything there is to know about the world. The significance, or meaning, behind events and objects is also important. Skill and knowledge can get you far, but in extreme situations such skill and knowledge are not enough to guarantee survival.

☝ The animal was depressed by the tremendous cold. It knew that it was no time for travelling. Its instinct told it a truer tale than was told to the man by the man's judgment.

Related Characters: The man, The dog

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

The man's traveling companion is a large native dog. As the pair walks, the dog waits for the man to stop and build a fire. The dog has learned from the past behavior of humans that they will build fires to survive in the severe cold, and the dog relies on human's fire-making ability as well. However, the dog has an ability that the man doesn't possess, which is a

natural instinct for survival. This quote introduces the differences between the man and the dog, which will be key throughout the story. The man continues to travel, while the dog wishes to stop and wait out the terrible cold. This quote presents the dog's instinct as a type of valuable knowledge by stating that the dog "knows" this isn't a good day to travel, and that this is a "truer tale" than what the man thinks.

The man's judgment is based on capable survival skills, but little imagination. He believes in his ability to survive because he has in the past survived in very cold weather, and so he doesn't consider the consequences of this even more extreme cold. In contrast, the dog doesn't think about possibilities or survival skills. It simply "knows" because of its instinct that the cold is unsafe. These two types of knowledge and judgment appear in contrast throughout the story. This quote shows the value that the story as a whole places on the dog's instinctual knowledge. The dog is presented as more aware and knowledgeable than the man, because it is more closely connected to nature.

☝ The creek he knew was frozen clear to the bottom,—no creek could contain water in that arctic winter,—but he knew also that there were springs that bubbled out from the hillsides and ran along under the snow and on top the ice of the creek. He knew that the coldest snaps never froze these springs, and he knew likewise their danger.

Related Characters: The man

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

The man and the dog are following the frozen creek, and even though the creek is frozen solid, the man proceeds cautiously. This quote introduces the reason for the man's wariness: springs bubbling up on both sides of the river may not be frozen even in the coldest weather. These present risky areas where the man could fall through and get wet. Although the man lacks imagination, he possesses strong survival skills and is aware that getting wet will rapidly lead to frostbite and possible death. London introduces the possibility of such creeks early in the story, foreshadowing the threat that will appear later.

The way the springs are described can also be taken as a metaphor for the human condition more generally. First, the

creek is described as frozen solid, and it seems impossible that any water could be flowing in this weather. But the springs which well up around the stable and frozen ice and flow under the snow are concealed, and could surprise a traveler suddenly. While the man is aware of the possibility of this danger, and seems to believe that because he knows that the springs could surprise him that he will be able to avoid them, it turns out that his knowledge is of little use to him later in the story. Similarly, surprises often occur in human lives, and some things are outside of human control. Diligence, carefulness, and skill are all important, but the story makes it clear that the world is bigger and more random than any person can comprehend, and so no person should consider himself fully in control of his situation.

●● It made quick efforts to lick the ice off its legs, then dropped down in the snow and began to bite out the ice that had formed between the toes. 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.

Related Characters: The dog

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

The dog falls through the surface of the snow and into one of the concealed streams that aren't frozen solid. It then stops to clean off the chunks of ice that form instantly on its legs and paws. This quote describes the dog's motivation for these actions, which aren't completed rationally or consciously, but instinctively. The dog doesn't consider the outcome of having wet feet, as the man does later in the story, but the dog is aware that having wet feet should be immediately addressed. The dog's way of knowing how to behave and the man's way of knowing how to behave are placed in contrast with each other throughout the story.

London describes instinct in a variety of different ways. In this quote, it is stated that the dog "did not know" the outcome of leaving ice on its feet. Instead, the language describing the dog's actions includes words like "mysterious" and "crypts" (hidden underground chambers), both of which emphasize that this type of instinctual knowledge seems foreign to the man and to the human author. Humans lack this powerful kind of instinct, or are

unable to access and obey it, in the space of this short story. Therefore, the man is at a disadvantage compared to the dog.

●● On the other hand, 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. It was not concerned in the welfare of the man; it was for its own sake that it yearned back toward the fire.

Related Characters: The man, The dog

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

When the man and the dog leave their fire after lunch, the dog senses that it is unsafe to continue walking on such a cold day. The dog whines and is reluctant to leave the fire, and while this behavior may seem to be an attempt to protect the man from the dangers of the cold, London explains here that the dog acts with only consideration for itself. The dog does not try to protect the man because there is no "keen intimacy," or close connection, between the man and the dog. This may be partially because men and dogs are so different from each other, but this particular man/dog relationship is one with even less empathy or connection than most. The man does not treat the dog with kindness. He does not "caress" or pet the dog, and has used a whip-lash to hurt the dog in the past. The dog is described as the man's "toil-slave," which means he considers the dog a working animal, and not a companion or pet.

The difference between men and dogs more generally is shown in the man's willingness to leave the fire and the dog's unwillingness to leave. The two understand the world differently: one through rational thought and the other through instinct, respectively. The resolution of this story shows that the dog's instincts were correct and that it was unsafe to travel in this weather.

●● He knew there must be no failure. When it is seventy-five below zero, a man must not fail in his first attempt to build a fire—that is, if his feet are wet. If his feet are dry, and he fails, he can run along the trail for half a mile and restore his circulation. But the circulation of wet and freezing feet cannot be restored by running when it is seventy-five below. No matter how fast he runs, the wet feet will freeze the harder.

Related Characters: The man

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

After the man falls through a running stream and gets his feet wet, he immediately begins to build a fire. He knows that he is in a risky situation because he must successfully build a fire on his first attempt. This quote also foreshadows the man's later failure to build a fire, and his failure to warm his body up by running. When the man fails to build a fire and when he tries to run, later in the story, we understand the consequences of these actions as they unfold because of the information revealed here.

The man knows the consequences of failing to build a fire and he thinks about these consequences as he works. The man (who, we remember, is "unimaginative") primarily considers mistakes he could make, and not chance events that could hurt him. He doesn't accept failure because he is confident in his own survival skills. Because of his confidence, he doesn't think about aspects of his dangerous situation that might be beyond his control, despite the fact that falling through the snow into the running stream was a chance event that occurred even though he was prepared for this possibility.

●● The blood was alive, like the dog, and like the dog it wanted to hide away and cover itself up from the fearful cold. So long as he walked four miles an hour, he pumped that blood, willy-nilly, to the surface; but now it ebbed away and sank down into the recesses of his body.

Related Characters: The man

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

Once the man has stopped moving, his blood is no longer circulating and keeping his body warm. This quote shows one risk of the man's situation: now that he is wet he has no choice but to build a fire, but to stop moving puts him at even greater risk. Although the man doesn't react with immediate fear to the accident, the language of the story shows that this situation is very serious. The man thinks that he can survive in the wilderness with his own skills, but there are things that are beyond his control, like the circulation of his blood and other natural behaviors of the body.

This is a key quote because of the simile that compares the behavior of the man's blood to the behavior of the dog. The blood is presented as independent from the man's will and actions, with a "life" of its own. Referring to the blood as "alive" highlights the blood's natural characteristics. Throughout the story, the dog stands in contrast to the man because of its instinct for survival. By comparing the blood and the dog, this quote shows that the blood is also "instinctual." The body behaves in a natural way, despite the man's rational thinking that contradicts the signals from his body to hide away from the cold. The language choices of "ebbing away" and "sinking down" are ominous, as if the man is losing the blood that keeps him alive.

●● He remembered the advice of the old-timer on Sulphur Creek, and smiled. The old-timer had been very serious in laying down the law that no man must travel alone in the Klondike after fifty below. Well, here he was; he had had the accident; he was alone; and he had saved himself. Those old-timers were rather womanish, some of them, he thought. All a man had to do was to keep his head, and he was all right. Any man who was a man could travel alone.

Related Characters: The man

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

After the man has successfully built a fire, he congratulates himself on his survival skills. His extensive self-praise in this quote is a familiar literary idea of "hubris," or "pride that comes before a fall." Because he is so certain

of his success in this moment, it hints to the reader that a failure will follow. The man is proud of his survival skills because he feels they have triumphed over the old-fashioned advice he received from the man at Sulphur Creek.

In this passage, the man at Sulphur Creek is belittled in a variety of ways. He is referred to as an “old-timer,” which the man believes means his advice and thinking is outdated. The man also describes him as “womanish,” and describes his own survival skills as true manliness. The man obviously considers it an insult to other men to compare them to women, and to be “womanish” in this passage is to be unnecessarily fearful or timid.

The man also demonstrates his lack of imagination yet again because he doesn’t consider that his fire might still fail. The following events show that the man was too quick to praise himself because he did not consider the risks that were still present. Another person might not relax until reaching the base camp, but the man does not imagine the risks that are still present in his situation.

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, and the fire was blotted out! Where it had burned was a mantle of fresh and disordered snow. The man was shocked. It was as though he had just heard his own sentence of death.

Related Characters: The man

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

The man has succeeded in building a fire, but the rising heat causes the snow in the above branches to shift and coming tumbling down. This quote describes the acceleration and accumulation of the snow that starts with one small shift and ends with a load of snow that smothers the man’s life-saving fire. This is a critical turning point in the story, in which the man’s emotions crash from a place of self-confidence to near certainty of death. The statement that

he felt as if he “just heard his own sentence of death” is the first time that death seems a likely outcome. Up until this point, the man has trusted in his survival skills and has not imagined the possibility of death.

This turn of events occurs partly through a mistake the man makes and partly through chance. The man makes the choice to build his fire under the trees without imagining the consequences of this decision. On the other hand, the collapse of the snow begins with a tiny chance shift in the tree branches that escalates, and the snow happens to fall directly onto the fire. Many events are the result of both chance and human choices.

The language of this quote emphasizes how the snow gathers momentum, “capsizing,” “spreading out,” and growing “like an avalanche.” This progression mirrors how the man’s situation in the story escalates from a small initial mistake to a tense life-or-death scenario.

And the man, as he beat and threshed with his arms and hands, felt a great surge of envy as he regarded the creature that was warm and secure in its natural covering.

Related Characters: The man, The dog

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

The man tries to build a new fire after his first fire is smothered under falling snow. He claps his hands and tries to warm up his arms in order to be able hold the tools he needs for making his fire. He is quickly losing feeling in his limbs, a complication that prevents him from succeeding in doing the one thing that can help him recover. This quote describes the man’s emotional reaction as his body fails him: he is envious of the dog because its body is better prepared for the cold. This passage is significant because it shows that the man is beginning to see that his survival skills may not be sufficient in these conditions. Instead he considers, for the first time, the advantages the dog has in its natural state.

This quote describes the man’s realization of his own physical insufficiency as a “great surge of envy” directed at the dog. This character has already been established as an unimaginative man, and in this moment he can only think in terms of survival—his or the dog’s.

●● He cherished the flame carefully and awkwardly. It meant life, and it must not perish.

Related Characters: The man

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

The man is unable to hold an individual match, but in a desperate moment he ignites the whole bundle of matches in order to start a fire. Earlier in the story, fire was described as key to warming up the man's numb fingers or preventing his feet from freezing. In this quote, the language shows the much higher stakes of the man's situation. The fire now means life, and the alternative means death. The narrator also says the fire "must not perish," which brings the language of death into the passage. If the fire perishes, the man will likewise perish. Furthermore, this personification of fire gives the fire a life of its own, as an earlier passage gave the man's blood independent life. This literary technique shows that the man is not in total control of the situation. His blood will cower from the cold against his will, and the fire could perish against his will.

The care the man takes in this passage as he "cherishes" the fire shows his increasingly desperate struggle for survival. Early in the story, the man does not appreciate the risks he's taking. As he begins to realize the danger, he fights valiantly to survive. Eventually, he moves beyond struggling to an emotional place in which he accepts death.

●● The sight of the dog put a wild idea into his head. He remembered the tale of the man, caught in a blizzard, who killed a steer and crawled inside the carcass, and so was saved. He would kill the dog and bury his hands in the warm body until the numbness went out of them. Then he could build another fire.

Related Characters: The man, The dog

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

The man's hands have grown too numb to build a fire, but

another idea occurs to him: killing the dog and using its body as a source of heat. This gruesome passage shows the man's imaginative powers activating finally in the face of death—but too late. Whereas once he ignored the advice of the old man at Sulphur Creek, now he is willing to latch onto another overheard story as an idea for his survival. He sees the dog as his last hope, and this quote shows that he is more than willing to sacrifice the dog's life for his own. The man is still in an emotional and mental place where he is fighting against death. This idea is described as "wild," which emphasizes that the man is reaching for every possible way to survive, unwilling to give up.

The straight-forward descriptions and the tone of this passage presents a situation that is both gruesome and realistic. Author Jack London does not linger over this idea or play up its graphic nature. The style of the language is as practical as the man's thinking. The man does not have any sentimental feelings about the dog, and likewise the passage states that he will "kill the dog" without dramatizing, judging, or sugar-coating this idea.

●● He realized that he could not kill the dog. There was no way to do it. With his helpless hands he could neither draw nor hold his sheath-knife nor throttle the animal.

Related Characters: The dog, The man

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

The man tries to kill the dog, but is unable to hold a knife or to strangle the animal with his frozen hands and arms. This realization accompanies a new level of helplessness for the man. He has a plan for survival, but he cannot execute it. His body, and not his survival knowledge, has failed him at this point. Notably, his survival skills depended on human-made tools—a piece of flint and a knife—but he did not imagine situations in which he would be unable to use these tools. This quote highlights the difference between the man, who relies on tools to compensate for the failings of his body, and the dog, who is protected by its natural covering of fur. The outcome of this story is partially the fault of the man, who lacked the imagination to predict and prepare for it, and partially the result of factors outside the man's control, such as his furless hands and arms.

This passage begins with the man realizing he cannot kill the

dog, and then clarifies that this is because he *physically* cannot kill the dog. The man is not prevented from killing the dog because he cares about it or because he doesn't want to harm another creature. The structure of this passage lets the reader fully understand the man's character and the seriousness of his situation. He is entirely consumed with his own survival at any cost, and he has just realized the likelihood of his death.

●● A certain fear of death, dull and oppressive, came to him. This fear quickly became poignant as he realized that it was no longer a mere matter of freezing his fingers and toes, or of losing his hands and feet, but that it was a matter of life and death with the chances against him. This threw him into a panic, and he turned and ran up the creek-bed along the old, dim trail.

Related Characters: The man

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

After the man tries and fails to kill the dog, he fully comprehends his situation for the first time. Although the dog and the old man from Sulphur Creek were aware of the risks of severe cold from the beginning of the story, only at this point does the man accept that he is likely to die. This quote captures the man's realization and subsequent panic. The language used to describe the man's fear of death—"dull," "oppressive," and "poignant"—are all words that convey metaphorical weight. The man has been burdened by the weight of his realization, but he still rebels against it. His panic causes him to try to run to warm up. He is unwilling to lie down and die, despite the seeming inevitability of death.

In this struggle for survival, the man is no longer a carefully measured and thoughtful survivor. He runs despite knowing, as the reader does, that he will not be able to warm up his freezing body without a fire. He has lost his rationality in the face of this panic. While the man is guided by his reason throughout the story, when he is confronted with death he behaves instinctively, as the dog did all along. The man is guided more and more by his emotions and instincts as the story progresses.

●● It was his last panic. When he had recovered his breath and control, he sat up and entertained in his mind the conception of meeting death with dignity.

Related Characters: The man

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

The man trips and falls for a final time and does not try to stand up again. This quote shows a turning point in the man's thinking, as he moves beyond a struggle for survival to an emotional place where he can accept death. The panic that came over him ends and is replaced by self-control. The man exhibited self-control early in the story when he was guided by rational thinking, and now he is able to approach the idea of death as the rational problem of "meeting death with dignity": if one must die, it follows that one should try to improve one's remaining time and the death itself as much as possible. The man hopes to achieve this by refusing to panic and by meeting death calmly.

This passage shows the man at his most imaginative. He is able to consider a possible future and to analyze a complex concept: dying with dignity. He has regained his self-control, but he is growing increasingly able to imagine the future and consider new possibilities. It seems that his extreme circumstances allow him to think and reflect in ways he didn't do when he was just focused on the end of his journey, meeting the boys, and having a meal. London is describing a universal human experience here: humans think about their lives in new ways and ponder abstract ideas when they are confronted with their mortality.

●● Later, the dog whined loudly. And still later it crept close to the man and caught the scent of death. This made the animal bristle and back away. A little longer it delayed, howling under the stars that leaped and danced and shone brightly in the cold sky. Then it turned and trotted up the trail in the direction of the camp it knew, where were the other food-providers and fire-providers.

Related Characters: The dog

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

The story ends with the dog realizing that the man is dead and continuing on the trail to find the camp. This shift in focus from the man to the dog happens once the man has died and the silence from the man demonstrates his absence from the world and from the story. The dog's understanding of death is different than a human's would be. It catches the "scent of death" from the man and it "bristles" and "backs away." This reaction seems to be an instinctual one to something the dog senses is negative and dangerous without understanding it. The dog waits for a while, but eventually continues on its way. This shows that the man is not unique in the dog's mind, but equally valuable

to any other human that is a source of food and fire.

The dog's indifference to the man's death is echoed in the silent indifference of the natural world. Only in this final passage does London employ poetic language as he describes the stars that "leaped and danced and shone brightly in the cold sky." In a story that uses description sparsely and practically, this metaphor about the stars stands out. The beauty of the natural world seems to mock the man who was killed by this extreme environment. The natural world is described as "cold," both literally and metaphorically, for it is indifferent to the man's struggle for survival and to his eventual fate.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

TO BUILD A FIRE

At dawn, the man turns aside from **the main Yukon trail**. He is a solitary hiker. There is no sun in the clear sky, as this northern part of Canada has not seen daylight in several days at this time of year. The whiteness of the land, covered in ice and snow, is broken only by the trail which leads 500 miles south and 1,500 north all the way to the Bering Sea. The landscape has no effect on the man, despite the fact that it is new to him. This is the man's first winter in this area.

The man's lack of interest is due to his lack of imagination. The man is competent and resourceful, but practical, uninterested in the meanings behind things. A temperature of fifty degrees below zero does not encourage the man to imagine his own weakness, the possibilities of life after death, or the meaning of life. Cold simply means discomfort, to him.

As the man walks, he spits, only to discover that the liquid from his mouth freezes in the air as it falls. He assumes from this that the temperature is colder than fifty degrees below zero. The man is hiking alone toward Henderson Camp to meet **the boys**, his traveling companions. He plans to arrive by six o'clock, when it'll be dark, but the boys will already be there ready to greet him with a fire and a hot supper.

The man carries his lunch inside his jacket against his skin, so that it won't freeze. The side trail he travels on is not well-marked. He acknowledges as he walks that it is truly cold. His beard does not protect his nose or the upper part of his face sufficiently.

A large wolf dog accompanies the man. The dog is made anxious by the cold, knowing instinctively that in such weather it is safer to hide and wait out the cold. Although neither man nor dog is aware, the temperature of the day is seventy-five degrees below zero. The dog watches the man carefully, expecting him to go into camp or seek shelter and build a **fire**. The dog looks to the man as the source of fire, and it desires that protective warmth.

The setting of the story in the extreme cold of the largely uninhabited Yukon establishes the thematic role nature will play from the beginning. Nature is awe-inspiring—extremely cold and stark—and also terrible in its indifference to individual human life. The man's fatal flaw, his unawareness of the power of nature, is established immediately.



The man's limited imagination repeatedly causes him to underestimate the power of nature. He is also confident in his survival skills, which rely on man-made resources, and not natural abilities.



The boys represent civilization and protection from nature. The man is alone in nature, which is dangerous. His freezing spit should reinforce this danger, but the man, because of his limited imagination, overlooks the risks and consequences of such extreme cold.



These details bring the situation to life. The man is a generic figure and many of the details in the story invite the reader to imagine him or herself in these conditions.



The dog is a key figure because it represents everything that the man is not: natural, instinctual, and aware of the power of the natural world. The dog is "in touch" with the weather conditions because of its similarities to its wild cousin, the wolf. The dog's instinctual knowledge is more helpful than the man's rationality, and its unmet expectations suggests the mistakes the man is making.



Both the fur of the dog and the facial hair of the man are frosted from their warm breath freezing. The man's chewing tobacco freezes in an icicle hanging from his mouth because the freezing material prevents from spitting effectively. The path follows Henderson Creek. The man is walking at four miles per hour and predicts his arrival at a place to eat lunch at half-past twelve.

The man and the dog walk along the frozen creek. The man is not a thinker and so he walks with few thoughts and reflections. He thinks only of his plan for lunch and of his arrival at the camp in the evening. Occasionally, he reflects on the cold, realizing that he has never experienced such extreme temperatures before. He rubs his face as he walks, but the skin instantly returns to its numb state once he stops. He wishes for a guard to more fully cover his nose and face from the cold. But, he reflects, a little frost is, at most, painful, never dangerous.

The man observes the changes in the creek and the safest places to put his weight. Once, he startles away from a place as he feels the ice move. The creek is fully frozen, but streams of water run from the hillsides under the snow. These concealed streams never freeze, and the depth of these waters might be three inches or three feet. These unexpected places of moving water present a very serious danger because breaking through the snow and ice to one of these streams could cause the man to get very wet. Getting his feet and legs wet at the very least means a delay. He'd need to build a **fire** and dry his clothes.

During his two hours of walking before lunch, the man happens upon several dangerous places in the ice. Usually the hidden water is indicated by a sunken area, but not always. At once patch, he sends the dog across first. The dog falls through the ice, but quickly crawls out on the other side. The water on its feet and legs freezes immediately and the dog lays down in the snow to bite away the chunks of ice. The dog does this instinctively, not because it understands the consequences of frozen feet. The man helps the dog, but his fingers grow numb within a minute of removing his glove.

The man arrives at the creek divide where he planned to eat lunch. He is pleased with his pace and settles down to eat. He strikes his numb, bare fingers against his leg to warm them. He tries to take a bite, only to find the ice around his mouth impenetrable. He laughs, realizing he should have immediately made a **fire**. The feeling in his toes when he first sat down has gone. He questions whether his toes are numb or warm. He leaps up and stamps his feet until the feeling returns.

The man and the dog, although different, are both impacted by the extreme conditions. The man's focus remains on the rational aspects of his situation: calculating his rate of travel and planning his lunch. He is as disinterested in nature as it is in him.



The man's imagination is limited because all of his thinking is limited. The man is not intelligent, despite being practical and resourceful. His quickly freezing face shows that he is not prepared for these extreme conditions, and yet he overlooks this warning sign, yet again. This is an example of an error that the man makes which contributes to his demise.



The mention of these concealed streams is a clear example of foreshadowing. Once this threat is presented in the story, it is apparent that they will manifest in some way later on. The danger that this risk presents is established before the event occurs. This literary technique allows the reader to understand the dangers of the situation as it unfolds. It also introduces the idea of chance: the man is prepared for these risks, yet he is still impacted by them.



The man's decision to send the dog across a dangerous patch of ice first reveals the lack of empathy or love between the dog and his master. The man would happily risk the dog's life. But the dog is also better prepared to deal with the risks of extreme cold as his act of biting away the ice on his paws shows. The dog is protected by his instincts, which the man lacks.



The man's initial failure to build a fire demonstrates how much he needs one. That the man is unable to eat without a fire despite keeping his lunch against his body again attests to the way his preparations are not enough to face this degree of cold. This first successful fire establishes fire as a source of life and protection, vitally important to the man's survival in the story.



The man remembers an **old man at Sulphur Creek** who told him how cold it could get in this area this time of year. He remembers he laughed at the old man, but now he realizes the truth in the old man's words. It is very cold. He gathers wood and lights a **fire** with a match. Once the fire is ready, he leans near to melt the ice from his ice. He eats his lunch. The dog lies near the fire. The man smokes his pipe, enjoying the brief break.

As the man continues his walk, the dog does not want to leave the fire behind. The dog knows this type of cold, as its ancestors did. The dog and the man are not companions or friends. The dog is the man's slave, and the dog does not care about the man's well being. Therefore, it does not attempt to help the man or express its misgivings about leaving the **fire** behind other than for its own survival. But the dog must obey the man's whistle to follow him.

For the next half hour, the man does not observe any signs of water under the snow. Then, without warning, the ice breaks and the man falls through into a shallow pool. His pants and boots are wet to the knees. He curses aloud at the delay. He knows enough to understand that he must stop and build a **fire**. It is too dangerous to be wet at this temperature.

Under some pine trees at the top of the bank, the man discovers some dry wood and grasses. He builds his **fire** carefully because he understands that he will have one chance to successfully build a fire. With wet feet, his time in such a cold temperature is precious. If his feet were dry, he could run to keep his blood circulating, but even running could not keep wet feet from freezing. The man is aware of the importance of building a fire if he's wet because of more advice from the **old man at Sulphur Creek**. He's grateful for the advice.

The man removes his mittens to pile the sticks and light the **fire** and his fingers quickly grow numb. His quick hiking helped keep his blood flowing, but as soon as he stops walking to build a fire, his extremities grow cold quickly. Like the dog, his blood wants to hide away from the cold, sinking to the central parts of his body, away from the surface. His nose, face, feet and hands grow numb first.

The freezing does not matter, the man tells himself, as the **fire** roars to life. The **old man at Sulphur Creek** had told him that no man should travel alone if it was colder than fifty degrees below zero. The man congratulates himself on proving the old man wrong. He'd had an accident and yet he'd saved himself without assistance. Any rational man, who is not old and womanish, should be able to do so, the man reflects.

The old man at Sulphur Creek presents a different possibility for the relationship between humans and nature: one based on healthy fear and respect of the natural world. The old man understands the natural world because he does not underestimate it, as the man does. Meanwhile, the man is able to enjoy life even in such cold with the comfort of a fire.



The dog's attachment to the fire shows that its instinctual knowledge is more effective in this situation than the man's scientific knowledge. The lack of care between dog and man is further established: both are only focused on their own survival and well being. A human companion would be a different type of support for the man.



The man's accident is a dramatic moment in the story, as both man and reader seem to fully realize the consequences: the stakes of building a fire are now much higher. The fire is literally the only chance he has at survival.



The man is cautious and careful in his fire building, and, yet, he overlooks the thing that will destroy him: the location of his fire under the pine trees. The man's care shows his practicality and awareness of the relevance of the advice of the old man at Sulphur Creek. The man is not foolish. This is important because it shows that even a resourceful human may not survive a chance accident in nature.



In describing the man's blood as "living" and comparing his blood and its reaction to the cold to the dog's similar reaction to the cold, the story shows that the man is, physically, still part of nature. His blood works instinctively, even if he overpowers this instinctual knowledge with his confident mind.



The man's success in building the fire seems a testament to his resourcefulness and the power of man in nature. Yet the man's self-congratulation also lacks any respect for nature, and smacks of a kind of pride before a fall...



The man starts to remove his moccasins, but the strings are frozen. His fingers are numb. Then he reaches for his knife to cut the strings. But, at that instant, snow falls from the pine trees above onto the man and **fire**. This was the man's mistake. He built his fire underneath the trees because it was easier to gather the wood. The tree above held a large amount of snow on its branches, and, as the man pulled sticks from the lower branches, he jostled the tree. Eventually, this movement created a landslide of snow from above.

The **fire** is smothered under a pile of snow. The man is shocked, as if he has heard his own death knell. He thinks of the advice of the **old man at Sulphur Creek**. A companion on the trail could make all the difference at that moment: he could have built the fire. The man knows he's likely to lose some toes at this point, even if he builds a second fire. He moves quickly and calmly, preparing a new foundation for a fire out in the open. The dog watches his activities.

The man reaches into his pocket to get a piece of tree bark that will easily catch fire and help him start his **fire**. But his fingers are so numb that he cannot tell if he has grabbed onto the bark or where it is in his pocket. He fights his growing alarm that each second spent trying to grab the bark is another second in which his feet freeze more fully. He puts on his mittens and beats his hands. He looks at the dog, which is secure and safe because its natural body provides the protection it needs against the cold.

Some feeling returns painfully to his fingers and the man manages to remove the tree bark from his pocket. He retrieves his pack of matches, but his fingers are re-freezing and he drops the pack in the snow. He cannot pick up the pack. He tries to move deliberately; driving fear from his mind, he focuses entirely on picking up the matches, looking at his fingers closing because he cannot feel. He puts on his mitten and beat his hand against his knee again.

Eventually, the man gets the pack of matches between his mitten-clad hands and then into his mouth, breaking the ice as he wrenches his jaw open. He removes one match with his teeth, but drops it. He gets one match in his teeth and strikes it on his leg, but the smoke in his nose causes him to spit out the burning match into the snow. In despair, he admits that the **old man at Sulphur Creek** was right: he should never have traveled alone.

... which then destroys his fire. The collapse of the snow from the trees is the best example of the broader theme of chance and human error. The collapse of the snow occurs both through the man's failure to understand the consequences of the position of his fire, as well as by the chance of where the snow falls and when. But it also shows his failure of imagination, his failure to be interested in and see the broader possibilities and risks of the world around him.



In the moment of his fire's collapse, the man is humbled. He begins to admit that the old man was right and that the situation is extremely serious. However, he still refuses to consider the possibility of his own death and he still focuses on the practical steps toward survival. The watching dog again suggests the man's lack of instinctual response to his situation (as opposed to his rational, practical response).



The detailed and painstaking description of the man's struggle to complete simple tasks with frozen fingers demonstrates the realism of London's writing. The man's jealousy of the dog shows a shift in his thinking: he is no longer confident in his man-made resources, and recognizes that the dog is better prepared than he because of its natural abilities.



The man's attempt to light the matches is painful to read and to imagine because of its nightmare-like experience of being unable to do the one thing that will make a difference in saving his life. At this point, the ending of the story starts to become inevitable. The terror of the man, the stark indifference of nature, and the man's smallness within nature, are clear.



The man is betrayed by his own body: his hands fail him and he cannot control his natural reaction to smoke which causes him to drop the lit match. The man is unable to overpower his body's limitations with his mind. In this way, nature (the part of the man that is natural) continues to be stronger than human reason.



In sudden desperation, the man removes both gloves and strikes the whole pack of matches. There is no wind and so the man holds the pack to the tree bark. He cannot feel it, but he realizes his hand is burning from the smell of burning flesh. Then he feels pain, but still holds the matches. He drops them into the snow once the tree bark is lit. This small flame means life and he carefully adds grasses and wood pieces.

The man's body is shaking from the cold. He cannot successfully control his hands as he adds sticks to the **fire**. He tries to push a wet piece out of the flames, but he scatters the coals he has been cultivating. Each piece is smothered and dies. His fire has failed.

The dog is sitting across from the man and the sight of the dog inspires an idea. The man once heard a story about a man who survived a winter storm by killing an animal and crawling inside the corpse. The man thinks that he could kill the dog and put his hands inside the body to warm them. Then he could attempt to build another **fire**. He calls the dog, but his voice reveals his fear and his intentions. The dog shies away from whatever he senses in the man's voice. The man tries to crawl toward the dog, but this is unusual, so the dog is scared.

The man puts on his mittens and stands. He cannot feel his feet and looks down to make sure he is truly standing. He calls the dog again. When the dog comes, the man tries to grab it and is surprised again to find that his hands cannot grasp. He is able, however, to wrap his arms around the dog and hold it. The dog barks and tries to break free. The man realizes that he physically cannot kill the dog. He cannot hold his knife. He cannot strangle the dog with his frozen hands. He lets go and the dog runs off only forty feet before stopping and continuing to watch him.

The man discovers that he needs to look down to see where his hands and arms are because he cannot feel anything. He beats his arms and hands for five minutes when he is suddenly overwhelmed by fear of his own death. The situation is no longer one in which he could lose fingers or toes, but his life. Panicking, he starts to run along the trail. He is blinded by fear greater than anything he has ever experienced.

The man's actions of lighting all the matches and of letting his flesh burn until the tree bark is lit show the extent of his desperation. The simple narration of the story avoids overstatement or descriptions of the inner-workings of the man's mind. The reader sees and feels his fear through his actions.



This lack of bodily control reinforces the idea that the man's body has betrayed him. His lack of control of his hands is such that he accidentally puts out the fire he is trying to create. His practical, rational knowledge is worthless when he can't control his own body. But he never perceived of this danger as he couldn't imagine not having control of his body, and couldn't imagine the consequences of the cold.



The man's decision to kill the dog represents both his desperation and the absence of emotional bond between human and animal. The man is thinking like an animal, putting survival above all other considerations. Neither man nor dog considers the life of the other. Both only see the other as a means to their own survival. The man is not sentimental about the dog.



The man's capture and then release of the dog is another mental and emotional turning point. The man is used to having a plan and is surprised when he cannot grasp the dog or kill it, especially because he starts to carry out his plan and then is forced to abandon the idea. This shows more fully the betrayal of his body, which cannot carry out the commands of his mind or use the man-made resources, like a knife, that he has relied on.



The man is trying to be practical when he is overwhelmed for the first time by fear of his own death. His instinctual need to live overpowers his rational thought, and for the rest of the story, the man's thinking fluctuates between desperate desire for survival and certainty of death. This introduces the theme of fighting versus accepting death.



Running helps the man stop shaking. He regains some hope of being able to run far enough to keep his feet from freezing, to reach the camp. If only he could get there, then **the boys** would take care of him. But he also starts to think that he'll never reach the camp, and that he'll die in the wilderness. He tries to smother this thought, to overpower it when it comes to the front of his mind. He feels he is flying over the surface of the earth because he cannot feel his feet.

The man runs and stumbles. Then he falls. He cannot get up and decides he must rest before he continues. He lacks endurance for long-distance running. As he sits, he feels warm, but he realizes that actually more and more of his body is freezing. He pictures his body completely frozen, and this sets off a new panic. He runs again. He walks. He runs again.

Throughout the man's running and falling, the dog keeps pace with him. The man looks at the dog's warm coat that provides safety from the weather. He curses it aloud. He runs only one hundred feet before he falls. This time, he sits and feels calm. He thinks about dying with dignity after he realizes that he has been foolishly running around when his death is inevitable. He begins to grow sleepy. Freezing is not too bad, he thinks. Sleep is peaceful compared to other deaths.

The man imagines **the boys** finding his frozen body after searching for him the next day. He pictures them on the trail and himself with them. In this vision, the group finds his body lying in the snow and the man feels that his is outside himself, looking at his body. He thinks again of the **old man at Sulphur Creek**. He murmurs aloud to the man that he was right in his advice about traveling alone.

Finally, the man falls into a sleep that seems more restful than any other sleep he has experienced. The dog sits waiting. Evening arrives. The dog is surprised that the man sits in the snow and does not make a **fire**. The dog cries out, longing for a fire. It expects the man to curse, but there is only silence. Later, the dog moves near to the man, but it smells death. It waits longer, howling, while the stars shine in the sky. Eventually, the dog leaves, running along the trail to the camp, seeking the other people who can make fires and provide food.

The man regains false hope as he runs. At the same time, he realizes new despair. The two extremes of hope for life and certainty of death are both in his mind. For the first time, the man is imagining possible outcomes of his situation. He had no such thoughts before when he was neither thinking nor imagining, when he was focused on rational practicality.



The man's body is failing partly because he did not prepare fully for the conditions he would experience in Yukon. This is an example of human error combined with the chance need to run for survival. He is now driven not by practical considerations but the desperate hope of life.



The dog's lack of understanding of the man's situation, and its own continued normal behavior, represent the indifference of all nature to the man's fate. Eventually, the man begins to accept death. The stages of his acceptance and exhaustion mirror real near-death accounts, demonstrating London's realism.



The man's out-of-body experience is representative of many real near-death accounts. His vision of the boys finding him shows his desire for the unattainable: other humans and civilization. As he falls into his death-visions (talking to a man who isn't there in a way that he never would have done when he was his earlier practical self) he displays a fuller understanding of nature. Of course, this knowledge came at the cost of his own death.



The final passage of the story contrasts the man's death with the stunningly beautiful natural world, which is also cold and indifferent. The dog's eventual departure from the man's body shows that humans are interchangeable in its mind, another example of the indifference of nature. The dog survives and the man does not, showing the triumph of instinct over rationality.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Champlin, Nikola. "To Build a Fire." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 21 Jul 2015. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Champlin, Nikola. "To Build a Fire." LitCharts LLC, July 21, 2015. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-build-a-fire>.

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MLA

London, Jack. *To Build a Fire*. Bantam Classics. 1986.

CHICAGO MANUAL

London, Jack. *To Build a Fire*. New York: Bantam Classics. 1986.