

Analysis of Jack London's Naturalist Themes Reflected in To Build a Fire

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Abstract

Jack London is one of the most popular American authors in late 19th century, who is active in American forum. He has occupied an important position in the American literature history and he is one of the representatives of early American naturalism, who is deeply influenced by Darwinism, and inevitably introduced the concept into his works. In this paper, the representative works To Built a Fire is taken as an example to explore the origin of naturalism and basic idea of development from the cold environment, dogs, and the protagonists.

Keywords

Jack London; naturalism; cold environment; dog; protagonist.

1. Introduction

Naturalistic literature was anchored in the English naturalist Charles Darwin and the theory of evolutionism. This is the origin of environmental determinism and hereditary determinism. Thereafter, human beings are not the center and host of the world. American naturalism was a new and harsher realism, and like realism, it had come from Europe. Naturalism was an outgrowth to realism that responded to theories in science, psychology, human behavior and social thought current in the late 19th century.

2. The Interpretation of Jack London's Naturalist Theme by Image of Cold Environment

In "To Build a Fire", the cold environment is the main clue of the story. The environment is too mighty and the intruding man is too petty. It is too easy for the mighty cold environment to conquer or crush the petty man. More often than not, the cold environment does its conquering or crushing job neither without fail nor with any mercy. The Northland is full of destructive forces and the man fought bravely against these forces. At last, the ending is invariably turns out to be either the damage or the destruction of the man. The death of the man totally reflects the cruelty and coldness of the world. Life is so hard and it is so difficult for people to live.

The cold environment is like the man's teacher. It teaches man about his limitedness by destruction. In this sense, the destruction of the environment is also constructive. The coldness of the environment is a great threat to the survival of individuals who dared to intrude into the wilderness. Actually, the coldness is a means for the environment to defend itself from being invaded and it demands the price of death or damage. The cold and deserted environment is hostile to all life and all living creatures, so all living being that want to survive it must pass the test it poses. As to the human intruders, it is not only a test of their physical fitness but also their intellectual prowess. In such a hostile environment, only the fittest can survive. Yet survival in the environment is no easy thing, for it is an unequal battle between the fragile man and the mighty power of the nature. The cost of the slightest error or ignorance may be death. The intruder intended to conquer the cold environment, yet they are always conquered by the latter.

By conquering the intruding human beings, the cold environment affiliates them. By battling dauntlessly with the cold and lethal environment, the human intruders' "disease of civilization" is cured and their rebirth is achieved. The cold environment is a killer and a curer, curing by destroying. The battle is bound to end with the intruder's death or injury, yet only in this way, the intruders benefit

from the lessons taught by the cold environment and the two parties reconcile with each other. Sometimes, the intruders win the battle not by their rationality but their irrationality, for rationality in the cold environment is important and even fatal. The loss of the human intruders' rationality and sometimes life is the sign of the compromise between the cold environment and its intruders." Only in death is there finality and only in non-rational action can one identify himself.

On the surface, the death of the man was an accident, yet in nature it was a logical result of man as a fragile creature in the vast cold Northland. The man made the mistake of venturing out alone under the temperature of seventy-five below. This was a serious mistake and it seemed that this mistake was followed by a series of other mistakes, but in fact the occurrences of all those mistakes were due to the ferocity of the environment. The cold environment was a merciless killer that would try its utmost to rob the bold intruders of their lives. The intruder exposed himself to the vast cold land while the various malicious killing instruments of the environment those themselves secretly around the intruder. So even the smallest error was fatal and even the most experienced and toughest trail man was extremely vulnerable in such an environment. The cold environment was the most sophisticated killer. In "To build a fire", the man eventually surrendered to death after making tremendous efforts to the cold environment. It is also the reflection of the cruel world in which people are ruthless and show no sympathy for the others. They are always thinking about suppressing the others to get a feeling of the sense of achievement.

3. The Interpretation of Jack London's Naturalist Theme by Image of Dog

In "To build a fire", the dog is a partner of the man, but also a victim of the cold weather. The dog was nearly killed by his owner because of the severe cold. And finally it left his owner for survival. This is the real instance to the naturalism theme "survival of the fittest".

The dog fell into a spring and wet its paws. It immediately licked the ice off his paws for by instinct it knew the seriousness of the danger. Later, the man also fell into one and wet himself halfway to the knees. But this time only a fire could see him. In the mercilessly cold environment, a small mistake of ignorance might cost one's life.

Jack London's humanization of his dogs can be better understood only when his stories are put against the social and literary background of his times. London was born only fourteen years before the 1890 census, a time that marked the closing of the frontier, and the coming of age during that decade called "the watershed of American history," and died less than a year before the United States entered the World War I. He experienced the most crucial transition in this nation's economic, social and cultural development. The post-bellum decades saw the emergence and prosperity of industrialism in America. Industrialism produced not only financial giants but also industrial proletariat entirely at the mercy of external forces beyond their control. Numerous slums appeared where conditions became steadily worse, and the city poor lived a life of insecurity, suffering, and violence. As a result, new ideas about man's place in the universe began to take root in America.

Actually, the man had a number of amazing strong-points. For example, he was an observant man with a quite good knowledge about the Northland and the skill to survive in it. He could calculate the accurate time needed to cover his trail. He could arm himself with things necessary to resist the cold weather. He was alert to the dangerous hidden springs on the trail. He knew how to build a fire in the cold land and how to deal with frozen limbs and he even knew the way of recovering frozen limbs by putting them into the body of a dog after killing it. However, he still became victim to the cold environment.

4. The Interpretation of Jack London's Naturalist Theme by Image of the Protagonist

In "To Build a Fire", the protagonist ventured out alone, without realizing how cold it really was at the beginning. Though blindly confident, the man was very careful. He brought things necessary for the trail. For example, he prepared tobacco, biscuits, bacon and the essential thing – matches. To be

exact, he was not alone, for he had a dog as his companion. He possessed the basic knowledge to judge the weather and the environment and to resist the coldness. Walking in the snow, he drove dullness and coldness by chewing tobacco. He was able to calculate the time needed to finish the trail. And when walking in the riverbed, he was very cautious to avoid the fatal hidden springs under the ice and snow. At the end of the story, when his life was in immediate danger he knew the chance of survival lay in killing the dog to warm his frozen hand. This is the real instance to the naturalism theme "fatalism".

Placed in the infinite and irrational Northland, the finite and rational man from the civilized world was powerless and vulnerable. His life was in constant danger and it was as easy for the hostile environment to crush him as a man to crush an ant. Deprived of some primitive instincts and imbued with reason and rationality, the civilized man had a smaller possibility to survive the harsh Northland than the lower animals and the brute beasts. The intruding civilized man's littleness was obvious in the Northland. However, that is just one part of the story. No matter how harsh and hazardous the Northland was, the civilized man had made up his mind to explore it. No matter how long and how tough the journey was, the man would try his best to finish it. And finally, no matter how unexpected and how tragic his fate would turn out to be, he would meet it and accept it with dignity, without regret.

The greatness of the nameless protagonist in to build a fire also lies in his desperate final battle against death. In the frosty Northland, nobody could afford to wet his foot, especially when he was alone. Unfortunately, the man did so though he had been very careful. The only way to save himself was to build a fire. He made three attempts to build a fire. And his greatness was best displayed by the three attempts.

In the first attempt, he was careful in choosing the location and making a foundation for the fire, and then "he worked slowly and carefully, keenly aware of his danger." Meanwhile, "He knew there must be no failure "and "was appreciation the advice" of the old-timer. From these acts and thoughts we can see that even in grave danger, the man was calm and active. He did not panic nor was he paralyzed by fear of death. He just controlled himself to take the right action to save him. He knew in the Northland action was man's sign of living and stillness meant death. He succeeded in building the first fire and it grew stronger. Although the fire was eventually put out by melt snow from the tree above, the fire still symbolizes the temporary but hard-won success in the battle against the spiteful elements.

Looking at the extinction of the first fire he build, "The man was shocked, it was as though he had just heard his own sentence of death. But "he grew very calm" soon and started to build another fire while fighting against panic in his mind. Actually, the man was fighting against the environment and himself at the same time. In dire environment, some people were killed directly by traps set by the environment, but some others perished because of their fear, panic and despair triggered off by their sense of danger. In fear, panic and despair, people would make the bad situation worse and eventually brought themselves into an irrevocably fatal state.

But there is another group of people besides the above two. Once in danger, these people will keep their head by holding back fear, panic, despair and any other negative emotions. Then they will subjectively analyze the situation, swiftly figure out the way out and immediately take action. By acting this way, these people will succeed in rounding the danger or minimizing its damage if the danger is not a deadly grave on. And if the situation is deadly grave, they still will continue the battle to the best of their ability until their last breath. When everything that could be done is done, they will accept the end without regret. Although these people eventually are destroyed by the environment and embraced by death, their spirit in the battle could exceed their bodily death and testify the value of their existence. The man in "to build a fire" just belongs to this group of people.

Generally, the protagonist in To Build a Fire was depicted with a negative touch that lost his life because of his foolhardiness and lack of imagination. His weakness and his tragic end potently proved the littleness and frailty of the individual in the Northland. But even such a negative character

exhibited some precious merits in battle against the precarious Northland. These merits speak for the greatness of the protagonist.

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