

To Build a Fire

Biography

John (Jack) Griffith London (1876-1916) was an American author whose writings were heavily influenced by his life experiences and reflected the new respect for science of his day. Born in San Francisco, CA, and raised in Oakland, CA, London's early years were emotionally and financially difficult. His father abandoned the family when London was an infant.

After a series of odd jobs in his teen years and a failed attempt at selling his written work, London worked on commercial fishing vessels and then headed for the Yukon during the famed Gold Rush in the late 1890s. It was there that London amassed an abundance of experience and ideas and came of age as a writer. When he returned to Oakland, he re-launched his career. He became a popular novel and magazine writer and lecturer, but he was criticized for his political and social ideas.

His lecturing often kept him away from his wife and two children. During one of his lectures, he met and fell in love with another woman. Soon after, he divorced his wife to marry her.

London was so struck with life in the Klondike that his experiences there colored much of his work, especially his fiction. His most celebrated novels, *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* and his most famous short story, "To Build a Fire," reflect a recurring theme in his writing: man is in a constant struggle with himself and nature, guided only by his senses and little knowledge. London's writing style is stark, straightforward, and objective, echoing realism and naturalism, the literary movements of his day. In an attempt to portray life as it actually is, London depicts it as accurately as possible as a detached observer—not involving any of his own biases or emotions.

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Study Guide

1. The story is set in the Klondike region of the Yukon Territory. How does London describe it?

2. How is the day described, and what mood is set by this description?

3. The man's conflict with nature is demonstrated by the challenges and obstacles he encounters and his responses to them. What are some examples of this conflict?

4. The story is told from a third-person omniscient point of view, which gives the reader insight into the characteristics and thoughts of both the man and the dog. The man is revealed to be shallow, overconfident, arrogant, and ignorant. Cite some examples of the narrator's comments that illustrate these traits.

5. How does London use the man and the dog to illustrate the juxtaposition between instinct and knowledge?

6. How does the story demonstrate how an author's culture, environment, and experiences can shape their writing?
