A Lack Of Respect Essay, Research Paper

A lack of Respect

To Build a Fire by Jack London is a short story about a man traveling along the Yukon River in the bitter winter weather. While warned against traveling alone in the frigid cold, he ventures out to meet his companions at a remote camp many miles away, with only his dog. Overcome by nature s power, he eventually perishes along the way, leaving his four-legged partner to complete the journey alone. The story displays how the forces of nature can surprisingly overwhelm even the most confident of men.

The traveler, or also referred to as a chechaquo, is the main character of London s tale. He is a quick and alert man, yet lacks imagination to see things in the big picture. We know that he knows the ways of the arctic environment, but it becomes obvious that he has never experienced a situation like this. The man is observant and quite resourceful, exemplified when he coaxes the dog to walk ahead of him across the ice, in case of soft spots. A combination of arrogance and confidence are apparent with almost every thought he has. Even when faced with his own immortality, the man fights to contain himself and remain calm. London uses the dog traveling with the man to support some of the less obvious points in the story. We know from the dog s thoughts that the climate is not simply cold, but closer to unbearable.

The central conflict in the story is the Traveler vs. Nature. He displays a total lack of respect for the environment in which he has chosen to travel. From the beginning, the reader understands that the man is undertaking a task where most would wait for more suitable conditions. His trip begins well enough, yet soon becomes disastrous when he breaks through the ice and wets himself up to the waist. He is more angry than worried as he begins to build a fire to dry his wet boots and socks. His arrogance shows when he thinks to himself, Those old-timers were rather womanish. Due to a grave mistake on his part of building the fire under a tree branch overburdened with fresh snow, his fire is doused out when the heat collapses the branch. His extremities are already numb from the cold and he lacks the dexterity to light another fire so begins to run in an effort to get to his companions camp as well as increase his circulation enough to warm up. He fails in both attempts and soon collapses from exhaustion. While laying in the snow, defeated and dying, he comes to understand that the old-timer was right. You were right, old hoss; you were right, he says. The man cannot deny the awesome power of nature has defeated him.

London writes, To Build a Fire from the complete omniscient point of view. We are aware of what the Traveler is seeing, hearing, doing and thinking. We know things that happened before and what will probably happen after his death. This view allows us to gather facts, such as the seriousness of the temperature when the dog is depressed about traveling and knows that they should not be doing so. Never in the dogs experience had it known a man to sit like that in the snow and make no fire. shows the dog observing the man dying in the snow, in which it reflects on its past experiences and judges that something is wrong with the man. After catching the scent of death from the man it trots away in the direction of the camp. The reader normally would just see the dog walking away, yet the narration allows us to know what the dog was thinking.

The setting of the story is the Klondike along the Yukon River in the cold of winter. London gives the reader an extremely detailed picture of the place in which this all is happening. Day had broken cold and grey, exceedingly cold and grey is used by London to give us the introduction to the landscape of a winter day with chilling temperatures. The frozen moisture of its breathing, when describing the dog creates the feeling that rather than just cold, it was extremely cold. The rivers are frozen with three feet of ice and just as much snow on top. The curves and bends and timber jams give the reader the impression of mounds of snow and ice with a creek frozen clear to the bottom. All of these phrases alert the reader to the importance of the frigid weather in the story, as it seems the Traveler pays little attention to the consequences of his lack of respect for the forces of nature.