Yukon Jack Essay, Research Paper

The short lived life of Jack London is a direct reflection of his literary works major theme, the struggle for survival of strong men driven by primitive emotions. ?To Build A Fire? and White Fang are two of his works that coincide his life experiences and illustrate his literary theme.

London was born the illegitimate son of W.H. Chaney and Flora Wellmen in 1876. He never saw his biological father and his mother had little to do with him. Eight months after his birth, his mother married a man named John London. This is where Jack received his name. Even with his new family, that included two step-sisters, Jack still received little time or love from them. ?He claimed to have felt that he was a boy without a boyhood? (Marshall 749). In ?To Build A Fire,? a man is on a journey through the Yukon. He takes this journey alone, and therefore must face all challenges alone. This is much like the childhood of Jack London. London had to accept all challenges and obstacles in his childhood alone, because his family was not there to support him. Both Jack London and the man in ?To Build A Fire? are in control of their own destiny. As it turns out for the man in ?To Build A Fire,? he faces his death because of his solitude. !

London may be implying that if he had someone to guide him through the early stages of life, he might have turned out to be a more fulfilled and successful person.

2

By the age of twenty-three, London had held a numerous variety of jobs. He had been everything from a newsboy to an oyster bed pirate. He even bummed his way through the United States. In 1897, he traveled to Canada to try his luck in the Yukon Territory gold rush. This is the motivation behind his 1906 novel, White Fang. White Fang Centers around the ability of a man, through love and kindness, to tame a savage wolf, and turn it into a loyal domestic animal. This may not be relevant when talking about the relationship between London?s life and the novels theme. What is relevant though, is that the story did take place in the Yukon, a place where London had been during his life. The story contains struggles of man?s survival against nature, maybe London?s own survival against nature. London could also be portraying his survival against life in general.

During the same time period, London had evolved a working philosophy from Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer, and Friedrich Nietzsche which explained the world of his experiences to his own satisfaction. ?These experiences persuaded him to join the Socialist Labor Party and crusade for worker?s rights? (Kennedy 118). Even though London claimed to be a socialist, he contradicted his belief in socialism with his individualistic notion of the survival of the fittest. In the short story ?To Build A Fire,? London shows us what happens to the weak. The man freezes to death and the dog survives. London maybe using this story to expand on his survival of the fittest belief. In order for a man to survive the potentially blizzard cold temperatures of the Yukon, he must not only be in top physical

3

condition, he must also be equally fit psychologically. The dog in ?To Build A Fire? had both, a physical conditioning and a mental instinct, something London saw in himself. The man in the story experiences regret for not following the advice given to him earlier, but the dog presses on without regret or pity for the man, the same way London treats life.

London began writing in early adulthood. He found it was the easiest way for him to make money. His literary apprenticeship was comparatively short. He started by writing for a local newspaper in San Francisco, and before long the entire country took a liking to his work. London had published his first book, The Son of the Wolf, in 1900.

Also in 1900, London married his first wife, Bessie Madden. In 1903 he had left her and his daughters to marry Charmian Kittredge. Shortly after their marriage, London had left his second wife. London had always longed for a son, and neither of his wives had fulfilled that need. It was 1910 when London wrote his short story ?To Build A Fire,? not long after his two marriages, but long enough to get lonely from solitude. It is possible that the inspiration for this story came from London?s own yearning for warmth in his life, something that was no longer there. Everything for London seemed so cold now that there is no one there to share in day to day events. If the man in ?To Build A Fire? had someone with him, he would surely have gotten warm, even after he got wet.

4

In the remaining years of his life, London published two or even three books a year. These included short stories, short novels, long novels, social documents, and political works. ?By 1913 he was called the highest-paid, best known, and most popular writer in the world, with books translated into eleven languages? (Kunitz and Haycraft 843). By the age of forty, London was done writing. He made his fortune in his writings, but he managed to spend a greater one. ?Although the cause of London?s death [in 1916] was given out as uremic poising, a pad on his night-table, with a calculation of the lethal dose of morphine sleeping tablets, and two empty vials on the floor indicated that, like his autobiographical hero Martin Eden, he had taken refuge in suicide? (Kunitz and Haycraft 843).

Like his novels, Jack London was a strong man who always was in a struggle for survival. In his childhood, he had to struggle to get by without the guidance of a parental figure. In young adulthood, he was struggling to make a living. And in the later years of his short life, he struggled with alcohol and financial problems, leading to his death.

Yukon Jack

by

English 102

11 March 1997

i

Outline

Thesis sentence: The short lived life of Jack London is a direct reflection of his literary works major theme, the struggle for survival of strong men driven by primitive emotions.

I. Childhood

A. Jack London?s childhood lacked meaning and guidance.

B. Similarities exist between London?s childhood and his short

story, ?To Build A Fire.?

II. Adolescents

A. Early adulthood experiences gave London motivation for his

literary works.

B. London?s philosophy of life contributed to his style of writing.

III. Adulthood

A. In the 1900?s, London began settling down.

1. London began his writing career.

2. London?s two marriages effected his work.

B. Jack London?s life ended in suicide

5

Kennedy, X.J., ed. Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama.

New York: NY, 1995.

Kunitz, Stanley J., and Howard Haycraft, ed. Twentieth Century Authors.

New York: NY, 1942.

Marshall, Author C. ?London, Jack? Collier?s Encyclopedia. 1985.