Philosophical Themes in “To Build A Fire” by Jack London

The everlasting search for the meaning of existence has played a significant role in many philosophical theories. Does God exist? Is nature the holder of life? Are humans simply living a life with no meaning at all? Or do they dictate their own existence? In Jack London’s work, “To Build A Fire,” many existential themes can be interpreted through-out one man’s journey through the Yukon. Although the author displays the theme of nature’s superiority over man, he also expresses the common theories of existence every human faces through personal experience: anthropocentrism, nihilism, and a universal connection between all entities.

The reoccurring theme of the story is the idea of nature being superior to man. Through-out the entire story, the man battles with nature, ultimately losing his life to it. This idea suggests the power nature has over man, showing dominance in every aspect of his life. The man is purposefully unnamed to suggest the insignificance of his individuality. The gloomy atmosphere described at the beginning of the story suggests the power nature has on the mood of the man: “It was a clear day. However, there seemed to be an indescribable darkness over the face of things” (London). Although the destruction of nature was not physically apparent to the man, it was able to provoke emotion, which sets the idea of its control over him. Through-out the story, the man fails at every attempt to salvage his life. He finally surrenders to the power of nature when he fails at building a fire for the last time: “A certain fear of death came upon him. He realized that it was no longer a mere problem of freezing his fingers and toes, or of losing his hands and feet.
Now it was a problem of life and death with the circumstances against him” (London). The man now recognizes the power of nature and his own defeat against it. In the line, “He was losing his battle with the frost,” nature is given a human-like quality, expressing the man’s defeat against an almighty force (London). He finally dies comfortably in his sleep, frozen by nature’s grasp. This idea of pantheism, or the idea of nature being the divine power, is the main idea suggested by Jack London’s, “To Build A Fire” (“Pantheism”). The ending of the story suggests that Nature holds all power in the universe, making other entities a victim of the powerful force it displays.

Although nature is found superior towards the end of the story, the man has pre-existing elements of unrealistic confidence; he is an unexperienced traveler, discrediting all advice given to him. He believes he is the most significant entity in the world, disregarding the power of nature. The story expresses his idealistic superiority to nature by showing the man’s inability to conceive the severity and danger of the weather: “Fifty degrees below zero meant 80 degrees of frost. Such facts told him that it was cold and uncomfortable, and that was all. It did not lead him to consider his weaknesses as a creature affected by temperature. Nor did he think about man’s general weakness, able to live only within narrow limits of heat and cold.” The theme of anthropocentrism is seen in multiple lines of the story, using the man’s mentality as an illustration. Anthropocentrism can be defined as, “considering human beings as the most significant entity of the universe,” which is exactly how the man sees himself before surrendering to Nature (“Anthropocentrism”). Also, when describing the relationship between the man and his dog, the story says, “There was no real bond between the dog and the man. The one was the slave of the other” (London). He is unable to connect with the instincts of his dog, despite its accuracy, suggesting his inability to value other forms of life, only himself. He
constantly displays dominance over the dog, deeming it his slave, although the dog holds more knowledge and instinct that could have saved the man’s life. The story further explains the man’s superior attitude in the following lines: “But all this—the distant trail, no sun in the sky, the great cold, and the strangeness of it all—had no effect on the man” (London). This anthropocentric, or self-superiority, mind-set is another factor that leads to his death. Jack London’s influence of the German philosopher, Fredrick Nietzsche, may have been the main contributor of the “superman” idea, or the idea that man’s reason for existence on Earth is to conquer everything in his path, while upholding the idea that man is superior in every way (Walcutt 7).

Themes of Nihilism are illustrated continuously in the story. According to the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Nihilism can be defined as, “… the notion that the world is without meaning or purpose” (“Nihilism”). The man enters the story with no value of the meaning of life. He is simply traveling across the Yukon, discrediting every source of advice and warning given to him. This idea of no belief at all, or Nihilism, suggests that we simply go through life never questioning our existence or purpose. The story expresses this by explaining his view of the Yukon: “The trouble with him was that he was not able to imagine. He was quick and ready in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in their meanings…from there, it did not lead him to thoughts of heaven and the meaning of a man’s life” (London). Although, ironically, he unaware that his journey through the Yukon is a test of man’s faith, he disregards his surroundings and diverts his mind to the physical world only. This pre-existing view of life is a contributor to his death. London’s pre-existing beliefs allow the reader to engage in the philosophical themes purposely portrayed in the story; According to Charles Child Walcutt, “…these elements place London in the naturalistic movement, which embraces scientific determination, Darwinism, the Spencerian philosophy of evolution, and Marxism, all of which in
some way reflect the anti-supernaturalism and anti-traditionalism of a presumably scientific approach to human affairs” (Walcutt 44). Some of these influences, along with Frederick Nietzsche’s philosophy of Nihilism, sparked the idea of having no belief of existence at all (Walcutt 7). London found himself venturing on many philosophical journeys, concluding that there, in fact, was no God to be responsible for a human’s existence (Labor 32-33). In the story, the absence of God as a divine power suggests London’s disbelief in a spiritual entity being the holder of life. London’s belief in these elements can suggest the theme of Nihilism portrayed in this short story.

The story also expresses the idea of a universal connection, meaning that all living and non-living entities hold significance amongst each other. The idea of “all creation is one” is seen between nature and man in the story. Although the man is seen superior to the dog, it relies on him to provide food and safety: “But the animal sensed the danger. Its fear made it question eagerly every movement of the man as if expecting him to go into camp or to seek shelter somewhere and build a fire” (London). The dog has instincts of its own, but without the “food providers and fire providers,” it will be killed in the dangerous weather (London). Also, in the line, “There was the fire, promising life with every dancing flame,” the idea of nature providing him life suggests that nature and man are connected on a spiritual and physical level (London). As the man battles with his last minutes of death, he recollects the old man’s advice of having a companion on his journey. This idea of having a companion expresses the importance of being able to rely on another human being for life; he then admits that he is grateful for the old man’s advice. Also, the idea of using the dog’s carcass for warmth depicts the idea of having to rely on the animal to save his life; however, the dog’s instincts tell him to avoid the man. His connection to another human or animal could have been the difference between life and death.
Connectionism between all entities in the universe are repeatedly displayed in the story; a human cannot thrive without the help of another entity, whether it be nature or man. The story suggests that all entities need guidance and compassion in order to survive.

In “To Build A Fire,” the obstacles the man experiences express the internal turmoil a person faces while trying to understand his/her reason for existence. Many philosophical themes can be concluded throughout the man’s journey, leaving it up to the reader’s interpretation. However, Jack London’s purpose may be to provoke self-introspection and introduce the idea of enlightenment. Nature’s superiority over man, self-superiority, a meaningless existence and a universal connection between all existing entities are just a few themes the story provides. The meaning of life is a constant idea naturally occurring in all humans. Perhaps the meaning of life is to search for a meaning, with the journey being the answer to existence. Maybe there isn’t a unified answer or final outcome, but only an immense amount of knowledge, compassion, and wonder to be shared throughout the search. Maybe, one may finally know the answer when they are not in a physical form to share it. Or, maybe, they are to never know the answer, forever grasped by life’s mysterious secret.
Works Cited


