Foolish Decisions

Foolishness. Can someone’s foolish decisions lead to their death? What about a lack of imagination? In Jack London’s “To Build a Fire,” an unnamed man turns away from the main Yukon trail. He isn’t bothered by the fifty degrees below zero weather, no sun, the distant trail, or the frost. He thinks it’s no big deal and that he will be able to get through the terrible conditions with no problem. The author suggest that the man is without an imagination. A lack of imagination doesn’t seem like a priority in that kind of situation, but it turns out to be very important. Close to the end of the story, one learns that the man’s lack of imagination is what leads to such foolish decisions. His foolish decisions and lack of imagination end up getting him killed in the fifty degrees below zero weather. The point of this story is that foolishness will always have an unfortunate outcome and that a lack of imagination can be very costly because one cannot see the entire picture or understand information clearly.

In order to survive in this world, one must understand that an imagination is essential to life. According to dictionary.com imagination means, “the faculty of imagining, or of forming mental images or concepts of what is not actually present to the senses” (imagination). This helps one to understand that someone without an imagination can’t see the entire picture or truly understand information. The main character in London’s “To Build a Fire” is without an imagination which unfortunately leads him into making foolish decisions.
Also, as the man continues along the trail, one will see his mistakes get bigger, and costlier. Since he went off the main trail he must lead himself. According to expert Solansky, “However, wise leaders fear foolishness while foolish leaders are fearless” (Solansky 1). The man in the story is the foolish leader. One can tell because he is having to lead himself and he is fearless. He does not pay much attention to any of the terrible weather conditions, he just thinks he will be fine. This to plays a role in the lack of imagination because he may not be able to understand the weather information clearly. Some people might just label the man as stupid. Expert Balazs did an experiment of what makes a person be labeled as stupid. “We found that people use the label stupid for three separate types of situation: (1) violations of maintaining a balance between confidence and abilities; (2) failures of attention; and (3) lack of control” (Balazs). The man in the story seems to have a lot of confidence, but does suffer from situation two and three. The man does not pay attention to any details and seems to lack control whenever it comes to him quitting or to keep going.

The first foolish decision the man makes is right after he turns off the main Yukon trail. Snow covered the ground, but the man was new to such hardship. This was the man’s first winter. He sees the snow but isn’t bothered by it. “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 65). One can see his foolishness right off the bat. This is where the man goes wrong first. One can see that he doesn’t pay attention and how easy he thinks his hike will be. One can also see the man’s lack of imagination coming into play. One can see how the man does not know his surroundings very well. The man goes along without a care in the world and that will be a very costly mistake.

Furthermore, the second foolish decision the man makes is when he realizes there is frost forming on his body. The man first notices the frost on his nose. He regrets not wearing a mask
like most people wear in the cold. Even though there is frost forming on his face, he still doesn’t take the weather seriously. Most of the time, a hiker who feels frost on their face will build a fire, but this man doesn’t do that for multiple days. The frost did not take a toll on him at all. “But it did not matter much, he decided. What was a little frost? A bit painful, that was all. It was never serious” (London 67). One can see how foolish this is because any sane person would know that frost forming on the face is no joke. This is also due to the lack of imagination because, here again, one can see the man does not understand information clearly and does not see the entire picture. Just like before, the man pays no attention, thinks he will get through the cold weather, and moves right along.

In comparison, the man’s third foolish decision comes when he decides to walk along the creek. He noticed that the left side of the river did not seem to have as many puddles under the ice. He decided to walk along the left side of the creek not realizing that the ice could break on him any minute. Most experienced hikers would know that one could fall through the ice and get wet. With the man being unexperienced he just walks on up the creek not even thinking, but then the worst thing happens. “And then it happened. At a place where there were no signs, the man broke through. It was not deep. He was wet to the knees before he got out of the water to the firm snow” (London 71). The man’s foolishness and lack of imagination is still very visible. Unfortunately, the man hasn’t paid any attention to detail so this foolish mistake could be very costly. At this point, it is seventy five degrees below zero, and, now that his legs are wet, he might not survive. His lack of insight lead to his doom.

Likewise, the man’s fourth foolish decision was right after he started to notice his fingers going numb. The man pulled off one mitten at a time to try eat, but as soon as he pulled off the mitten his fingers would go numb. In this moment, he also realizes that he hasn’t built a fire. The
man thinks that it’s funny and doesn’t think a fire is really a necessity. This really shows how careless the man is and how he does not seem to care about the weather, because he thinks it will just blow over within the next few days. “Then he knew what was wrong. He had forgotten to build a fire and warm himself. He laughed at his own foolishness” (London 69). One can still see the man’s foolishness. One can also still see the man’s lack of imagination. The man is still very unsure of his surroundings. He seems to not process the weather conditions clearly and seems to not understand that he will die if he doesn’t get a fire going soon. Although one does know it is the man’s first winter, one can see how he really is unexperienced and that traveling alone probably wasn’t his best decision.

Similarly, his fifth and final foolish decision comes right when he decides he needs to build a fire. The man is so cold he is to his breaking point. He decides he should build a fire and thinks building it under a tree is a good idea. Now, most experienced hikers would have known to not build a fire under the tree because once the snow started to melt it would drip on the fire. Sadly, the man builds the fire under the tree thinking that he is protecting the fire. This seems to be working well until the tree shakes and drops snow on his fire. The fire he worked so hard to build was dead. “The snow fell without warning upon the man and the fire, and the fire was dead” (London 73). One can tell that the man is devastated by his fire going out, which causes his chance of survival drop drastically. One can still see the foolishness because if he was serious about building a fire, he might have taken a little more caution. Also, the lack of imagination is still present. He still doesn’t seem to understand what is truly happening or see the big picture. Unfortunately, this final foolish decision is just enough to lead to his death.

Sadly, the man’s final foolish decision got him killed. At the end of the story, it is clear how essential the lack of imagination really is. The man is actually surprised when the snow fell
from the tree; it was like he had no idea that would happen. “The man was shocked. It was like hearing his own judgment of death” (London 73). Since one without an imagination cannot understand information clearly, one can see how the man is very confused when this happens. When the author says that the man is staring at his own judgement of death one can also see how the man is in shock of how foolish he was. It is almost one of those “what an idiot” moments. Since a person also knows that one without an imagination cannot see the whole picture clearly, one can see how the man never looked at the entire picture as he hiked. According to expert Plaut, “So long as human beings design the experiments and interpret the results, their imagination will influence the outcome” (Plaut 60). This source shows that if one envisions their outcome their imagination is what will get them to that outcome. The man in “To Build a Fire” lacked this. He didn’t think about how he was going to get to the outcome because he just thought the cold weather conditions would come and go.

All in all, one can see that the man makes lots of foolish decisions in Jack London’s “To Build a Fire.” One knows that the man didn’t pay much attention to his setting like the snow, lack of sun, or the distant trail. One also knows that he did not care about the frost that formed on his face, a fire, or when his pants got wet. One can see how unexperienced the man is and that it is for sure his first winter. The lack of imagination is very visible in the story because, throughout the entire piece, the man does not seem to be looking at the entire picture. He did not seem to realize that each day that went by and each foolish decision he made got him closer and closer to his death. One can see that a lack of imagination is what made the man make all of the foolish decisions. A person can read London’s “To Build a Fire” and label the man as foolish or stupid. One does not think he/she would make these same mistakes if they were stranded on their own. One can also think that they have an imagination so they would never act as foolish and
careless as the man did. One cannot really say for sure what he/she would do if they were in this man’s shoes. One could only hope that their foolishness would not lead to their death.
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