The Existential Theme in Jack London's "To Build A Fire"

Jack London’s short story, “To Build a Fire,” is the tragic tale of a man who decides to travel alone through the hostile environment of the Yukon in sub-freezing temperatures and falls victim to the unrelenting and unforgiving power of nature. During his journey, the man gets his feet wet as he falls through the ice into the water of a hot spring (London 122). Because of the severity of the cold, some “one hundred and seven degrees below [the] freezing point,” the man’s life depends upon his ability to promptly light a fire to keep his feet from freezing (122-23). After one, half-successful fire-starting endeavor, and several other pitiful attempts, the hopelessness of the man’s lone struggle against the hostile environment of the Yukon begins to become apparent. After a lengthy episode of panic in which the man tries desperately to return the feeling to his extremities by “running around like a chicken with its head cut off” (128), the man at last “grows calm and decides to meet death with dignity . . .” (Labor 66). The story’s central theme is one portrayed by many existentialist writers—that man lives a solitary existence which is subject to the relentless, unforgiving forces of nature; an ever so subtle part of this theme is that it is man’s goal to find meaning in his existence.

The word existentialist, as well as the subject of existentialism itself, evades definition. Davis McElroy points out this problem by comparing the act of defining existentialism to the act of trying “to explain human existence in a single sentence . . .” (xi). For the sake of brevity, perhaps a short, simple definition would be best; according to the American Heritage Dictionary (3rd ed.), existentialism is “a philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual in a hostile or indifferent universe” This statement defines the theme of Jack London's short story—the lone man traveling across the bleak, unfriendly expanse of the Yukon can come to be seen as the solitary individual who inhabits a cruel and indifferent cosmos. At the conclusion of the story we finally see the man come to the realization, in a round about way, that it was best to meet his fate with dignity, thus giving meaning to an otherwise meaningless and cruel death. This existential theme in “To Build a Fire” is not likely to be a mere coincidence, but instead appears to be part of London’s intentional design. According to Charles Child Walcutt, Jack London was greatly influenced by the ideas of such men as Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and Friedrich Nietzsche, all prominent thinkers of London’s time (5). So it is no accident that at the heart of the story lies an existentialist theme.

London emphasizes the existential theme in “To Build a Fire” in several ways, the most important of which is his selection of the setting in which the story takes place. The story is set in the wilderness of the frozen Yukon during the harsh winter months when “there was no sun nor hint of sun” in the sky (118). London places his solitary human character in the perilous setting of the wilderness of the Yukon, which is enough to begin to illustrate his theme, but when London combines this unforgiving environment with the deadly cold of the Yukon winter, he creates a setting which is the epitome of the hostile, existential environment. The remoteness of the Yukon wilderness, as well as the absence of a human travel companion for the man, serve to illustrate the existentialist idea that man is alone in the universe. To further emphasize this idea, London has not given the protagonist a name, but simply refers to him as “the man” throughout the story. By not naming the character, London has placed him at an even greater distance from the reader within his deadly setting, thus isolating him all the more in a bleak and hostile universe.

Imagery is an important element which London uses to illustrate and emphasize his theme. Earl Labor sees the “mood and atmosphere, which is conveyed through repetitive imagery of cold and gloom and whiteness,” as being “the key to the story’s impact” (63). Indeed, London does rely heavily on imagery to set the mood of the story, and in this way he draws a picture of the merciless environment his character must endure. London uses imagery with such skill that the reader can almost feel the severe and deadly cold of the environment and can almost hear the “sharp, explosive crackle” when the man’s spit would freeze in mid-air (119). Through the use of such vivid imagery, London guides the reader toward the realization of the story’s theme; the reader can visualize the man “losing in his battle with the frost” and thus can envision man in his conflict with a cruel and uncaring universe (128).

London also uses irony to illustrate and stress his existential theme. The man is “keenly observant” as he moves through the treacherous terrain of the Yukon (120). He is constantly on the lookout for signs which tell of the
hidden dangers that he wishes to avoid, but, ironically, the man “falls through the ice” in an area which is absent of any “treacherous signs” (Perry 227). The man gets a further dose of the capricious and impassive nature of the universe when, after painstakingly starting a fire, the life-sustaining fire is ironically snuffed out by falling snow just as he is about to begin thawing out his freezing feet. King Hendricks sees irony in that even “with all his knowledge [the man] is still a helpless victim to natural powers and natural forces” (22). Hendricks further notes the irony in the fact that the man “could not survive in the Arctic [sic] weather of 75 degrees below zero while the dog, living only by instinct, without mittens, without earflaps, without a coat, without lunch, and without a fire, saved himself” (22). To preserve the existential theme of man being alone in an uncaring cosmos, the reader must not be confused by the presence of the dog as a traveling companion to the man; the reader must instead see the dog for what it really is—a further extension of the apathetic and uncaring environment. The dog is not a sentient being as man himself is and cannot therefore be looked upon as being a kindred spirit who shares the bitter existence of the lone, lost soul who is the protagonist. By accenting the essential parts of his story with irony, London directs the reader’s attention to the heartless indifference of nature and thus the existential theme of man’s living a solitary existence in a capricious and harmful universe.

With his classic style, Jack London has created an exciting and unforgettably tragic tale which illustrates a modern philosophic theme. This story’s theme speaks of man’s need to find meaning in the sufferings of his solitary existence in an environment which is both hostile and indifferent to his sufferings. London illustrates and emphasizes this theme in three ways: through his choice of setting, his imagery, and his artful placement of irony within the story.

Works Cited


--Richard F. Robbins