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THE WATCHING DOG

The Animal Gaze in Jack London's "To Build a Fire"

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Abstract

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Abstract: This essay examines the role of the nameless dog in Jack London's 1908 short story "To Build a Fire". While it is a story previously studied for its naturalist and determinist themes, this essay turns the spotlight onto the dog as a significant character that should not be overlooked in readings of the story. With the help of literary human-animal studies and the writings of Jacques Derrida and John Berger, the essay shows the importance of the dog, and discusses how the dog resists notions of traditional canine symbolism. Special attention is given to the concept of the animal gaze, used in the story to question human authority and power. The reading shows that the dog possesses agency, making it a noteworthy literary character in its own right.

Keywords: Jack London, To Build a Fire, human-animal studies, dogs, animals, the animal gaze

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Introduction

Together with authors such as Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris, the American naturalist movement saw Jack London (1876 – 1916) as one of its most prominent names. Living an adventurous life, he was also a very productive writer, with his most notable works often considered to be *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906). Like many of London's stories, both these novels are set during the gold rush in the Klondike and feature dogs; *The Call of the Wild* follows a canine main character that during the novel becomes progressively feral, while *White Fang* is its companion novel, mirroring the plot by following a wolf dog that is slowly domesticated. The same setting, as well as the presence of a canine character, returns in the 1908 short story "To Build a Fire", which is the subject of study for this essay.

The short story, arguably London's most well-received work in terms of criticism and one of his short stories most frequently anthologized (Lundquist 87), follows an unnamed man as he sets out for a day's hike towards a camp where his friends are waiting. He does so despite being advised not to because of the extreme cold – he is a newcomer to the area and does not take the advice seriously. He is accompanied only by a native dog, which due to its instincts has a better conception of what it means to travel in such cold. As the day progresses, the man steps through a patch of ice and soaks his feet. At first only annoyed, he stops to dry out his footgear. However, as he begins to struggle with building a fire, panic starts to descend on him. At the point at which he tries to kill the dog in order to warm his hands inside the carcass, the reader has understood that the man is doomed. In his last hours, the man tries to run the remaining distance to the camp but must eventually come to terms with the inevitable and freezes to death while the dog watches him. The story ends with the dog realizing that the man is dead, and it leaves him to return to the camp it came from.

The story is the re-worked version of one first written in 1902, when it appeared in a juvenile magazine aimed at young boys. The first version was to be read as a cautionary tale, and had a vastly different ending – here, the man survives with frostbite and a moral tale to tell, and there is no mention of a dog. London later re-wrote the story and it was published in the *Century* magazine in 1908, and later that same year in the collection *Lost Face*.

The themes of nature and man's role in it are prominent in the story and are also deeply tied to the issues of the naturalist movement in which London operated. It is in this context that the story has mostly been discussed – it is often seen as a prime example of a determinist outlook in naturalist literature, concerned with the agency of the man. Lee Clark Mitchell is one of the

scholars who argues that the man is to be seen as a symbol of man's struggle in an uninhabitable world where nothing can be altered (38), a stance refuted by Donald Pizer, who instead argues that the man is the figure of a novice unable to grasp the severity of the situation he is in (219). While these are interesting discussions, this essay wants to turn away from the issues of determinism and man's role in nature and instead focus on the role of the dog in the story. The presence of the dog is a subject strangely untouched upon in previous research; despite it being the only character except the man within the story, most research barely mentions it. Considering the shifting relationship between the man and the dog, as well as London's extensive interest in canine characters, I believe "To Build a Fire" would benefit from a literary human-animal studies analysis. By studying the dog, I aim to prove that it plays a meaningful role that should be taken into consideration when reading the short story, and that it is more significant to the story than perhaps previously thought.

My choice of the dog as a focal point has also been made with regard to the interesting cultural and symbolic aspects that canines carry. As animals domesticated by humans and sharing thousands of years of history with humankind, they are one of the most familiar animals to us, and one of the most common that we surround ourselves with. They are typically associated with positive traits, visible in ideas of the faithful pet, present as far back as in Homer's *Odyssey*. All the same, they are what Paul Shepard calls "borderline animals" (62), embodying a vast variety of both positive and negative traits:

We must realize that throughout most of its history of at least ten thousand years, dogs have seldom fared as well as they do now ... the inverse dog is the spoiler of human graves and eater of corpses, the keeper of hell's gates, the carrier of rabies ... The antitype of the dependable servant at the doorstep is the untamed, bastardized outsider, all those hangdogs who have circled human settlements for millennia, wolfing scraps, harassing livestock, and scavenging from the battlefields, prototypes of antigods at the fringes of the known world. (62)

It can be said that dogs might be the one animal that more than any other occupy a liminal space and straddle the boundaries of human and animal, civilization and wilderness, even good and evil. This double-edged nature means dogs are able to carry both positive and negative symbolic traits, so that they "retain a negative symbolic value that haunts the image of the loyal and lovable pet so that, in effect, the dog is simultaneously companionable and contemptible" (Anderton 274). For this essay, these symbolic values of dogs will be considered in my analysis of the dog character.

However, I am also interested in going beyond the possible symbolic aspects of the dog and explore the dog not as a symbol, but as a subject possessing its own agency as a literary

character. In order to do this, this essay will focus on the role of the dog as an observer and will be concerned with the issue of the animal gaze, as discussed and defined by, among others, Jacques Derrida and John Berger. The concept of the animal gaze can be argued to clash with the notion of animals as symbols, an opposition I will discuss further. Special attention will also be given to the power relation between the man and dog in the story, and how it is connected to the animal gaze as well as to plot structure and setting.

The thesis of this essay is therefore to argue that the animal gaze is used within “To Build a Fire” to explore the power relationship between the man and the dog, ultimately marking the dog as an agent rather than a symbol. To do this, I will attempt to answer the following questions: Does the dog carry symbolic meaning, and if so, what does it represent? What role does the animal gaze play and what effects does it have on the story? What is the relationship between the man and the dog, and how does it change throughout the story? I will attempt to address these questions with the help of literary human-animal studies, and in order to contextualise the short story, I will also discuss it in relation to *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*, since these are London’s most read and well-known works concerned with dog characters and share much of their settings with “To Build a Fire”.

The essay will be divided into three chapters. For chapter one, I will discuss the theoretical framework and method relevant for my analysis, namely literary human-animal studies, with special attention given to the animal gaze. I will also discuss the dog theme in *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* in order to contextualise “To Build a Fire” and reach a better understanding of the importance of dogs in Jack London’s writing.

For chapter two, I will move on to my analysis of the short story. I will begin with the potential symbolic readings of the dog, as well as how the relationship between the man and the dog is portrayed through the plot structure. For chapter three, I will move on to an analysis of the dog as an observer and the story’s use of the animal gaze, and in what ways this creates an opposition to the notion of the dog as a symbol, before finally moving on to a conclusion.

1. The Animal Observer: Human-Animal Studies and the Animal Gaze

I will take on “To Build a Fire” with the help of human-animal studies, a relatively new and growing interdisciplinary field devoted to the study of the relationships between animals and humans. Human-animal studies focuses on the often overlooked fact that animals are present in human lives, cultures and history in ways that shape both human worlds and consciousness. Animals play important parts in human cultures through all time and all over the world – they feature in creation stories, appear on the first cave paintings and have throughout history been used for food, clothing and transportation. Furthermore, they figure not only in art, literature and film, but also surround humans since childhood in the form of toys, cartoons and pictures. They are used in sayings and are assigned qualities, such as dogs are loyal, bulls are angry, and donkeys are stubborn. Our relationships to animals have changed throughout history and differ between cultures – certain animals are kept for pets in some cultures and eaten in others. Studying animals, then, means to also study the ways in which we as humans use them to think about ourselves, and the ways in which we are shaped by them (Foer x).

In general, human-animal studies aim to question the idea of a break between human and animal, consider the ways in which humans are shaped by animals, how humans consider themselves in relation to animals, and how animals are represented in culture and in history. Within the humanities, human-animal studies can be said to be divided into the study of representations of animals in culture and the philosophical questions of animal rights (Garrard 146). In literary human-animal studies, the focus is on representations of animals in literature and how they matter in terms of what they tell us of the relationships between humans and animals.

I have chosen literary human-animal studies as the theoretical framework for approaching the dog in London’s short story, since it focusses squarely on the animal presence that previous research has largely overlooked and calls conventional readings of animals into question. In applying these ideas onto the story, I will perform a close reading of the parts where traditional dog symbolism is visible and discuss how the dog relates to it. With its focus on the shaping of human identity through animals, I also believe the relationship between the man and the dog benefits from a human-animal studies analysis, since the story uses the relationship partly to build contrast between the man and the dog and juxtaposes the two in order to further the notion of the man as incompetent.

As previously mentioned, this essay also contains an investigation of the animal gaze, of particular interest to “To Build a Fire” not only because of the shifting power relationship but also because of the important role of the dog as an observer. The short story uses the animal gaze in order to establish the dog’s power over the situation and to diminish the man’s power at the same time. In using the animal gaze, the story overthrows the common trope of the faithful dog, instead opening up to a power play between the two characters and the possibility of the dog as an agent. To examine this, a close reading of the parts where the animal gaze appears will be executed as well, combined with some narratological reading in order to discuss how the relationship relates to the narrative.

I will rely on the notion of the animal gaze as it is discussed by John Berger in his 1980 essay “Why Look at Animals?” and by Jacques Derrida in *The Animal that Therefore I Am* (2008). The animal gaze is defined by Wendy Woodward as “... a gaze initiated by the animal, meditative in its quietness and stillness and which compels a response on the part of the human, as it contradicts any assumed superiority of the human over the nonhuman animal” (1). The animal gaze questions power, self-awareness and agency in the relationship between humans and animals and is noteworthy because of the fact that humans typically always are in the observing position. With the observing also comes the power to assign names, to interpret and to examine the animal. It is a vantage point that means mastery of the animal, and to recognize that animals can also observe us puts these notions into question.

In “Why Look at Animals?”, Berger discusses the shifting view of animals from a historical and cultural standpoint, with special attention given to what it means to be seen by an animal. He argues that in the beginning of human-animal relationships, animals possessed agency, mystical properties and an equality to humans that can still be recognized through, for example, the presence of animals in creation stories. However, he concludes that the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism have minimalized the contact humans have with animals, and essentially rendered them marginal in modern cultures.

Jacques Derrida is also concerned with the animal gaze, which he discusses extensively in *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, a book devoted to animality and the space between that which we call human and that which we call animal. Throughout the book, Derrida returns to his experience of being seen naked by his cat, and how the gaze of the cat causes him to feel shame, a feeling typically reserved for the gaze of humans. He, like Berger, recognizes that in the society in which we live, animals are always the observed, and in a moment in which the relation is the opposite, we as humans are forced to consider and recognize the animal mind and the animal experience. In the gaze of the cat, he becomes aware of the otherness:

... seeing oneself seen naked under a gaze behind which there remains a bottomlessness, at the same time innocent and cruel perhaps, perhaps sensitive and impassive, good and bad, uninterpretable, unreadable, undecidable, abyssal and secret. (12)

Derrida also recognizes the individuality of the cat that is looking at him – it is his cat, a specific, present feline, and not a category of “animal”, meaning not reduced to a symbol. To recognize this is to realize that the cat has a life of its own – that it experiences complex emotions and that it has agency and intentionality, and that the nonhuman animal is a subject rather than an object confirming human superiority. For both Derrida and Berger, being seen by an animal also gives form to the human that is being seen – we are defined by the otherness of animals, and they shape us both by being different and alike us. This applies to “To Build a Fire”, where the man takes on the identity which the dog ascribes to him, and where the dog in the process proves its role as an agent rather than a symbol.

While the animal gaze is of great interest to “To Build a Fire”, it is also important to regard the presence of the dog in connection to Jack London’s previous writings on nonhuman characters. He wrote extensively about dogs, wolves, and wolf-dog hybrids, who are the focus of his novels *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*. Not only do these works share their settings with the short story, but as they feature canines, they also serve as a good starting point for understanding London’s view of dog lives.

Both *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* explore themes of heredity and environment, typical to the naturalist movement and present in the short story as well. The former does so through Buck, the main canine character who after being stolen from his civilised home in California must survive in the harsh environment of the Klondike. Here, he becomes progressively feral, until he ultimately returns wholly to the wild. *White Fang* is the companion novel of *The Call of the Wild* and mirrors its themes in having the titular dog go from a wolf-dog born in the wilderness to a fully domesticated dog. Published at the turn of the twentieth century, both novels are part of the animal story genre, which began with Anna Sewell’s *Black Beauty* (1877) and became popular in North America during the 1890s (McGill 88). One reason for the genre’s popularity is speculated to be the growing acceptance of evolutionary theories, which suggested that there were similarities between human and animal mental and emotional capacities (88).

London’s dogs, heavily inspired by Darwin’s idea of survival of the fittest, as well as the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, must fight for survival and establish dominance over other dogs, humans and the very environment they find themselves in. As they rise above their

challenges, they both take on mythical proportions when described, becoming what one can argue is the canine equivalent of Nietzsche's übermensch, illustrated by this excerpt from *The Call of the Wild*:

A carnivorous animal, living on a straight meat diet, he was in full flower, at the high tide of his life, overflowing with vigour and virility. When Thornton passed a caressing hand along his back, a snapping and crackling followed the hand, each hair discharging its pent magnetism at the contact. Every part, brain and body, nerve tissue and fibre, was keyed to the most exquisite pitch; and between all the parts there were perfect equilibrium or adjustment. To sights and sounds and events that required action, he responded with lightning-like rapidity. Quickly as a husky dog could leap to defend from attack or to attack, he could leap twice as quickly. He saw the movement, or heard sound, and responded in less time than another dog required to compass the mere seeing or hearing ... Life streamed through him in splendid flood, glad and rampant, until it seemed that it would burst him asunder in sheer ecstasy and pour forth generously over the world. (London 61)

As any narrative involving animals, London's dog novels deal with the problem of the animal mind. Since animals do not speak our language and we do not speak theirs, any attempt at describing their inner lives is limited to interpretation. For London, the challenge of *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* lies in describing canine thought without compromising the characters' authenticity as dogs. In both novels, London uses third-person narrators to convey the thoughts of Buck and White Fang, frequently commenting that the dogs do not reason or think in "man-fashion". However, the narrating voice often clashes with the actual events in the novels, and despite London's clear efforts to avoid anthropomorphism – human thought projected onto an animal – the portrayals of the dogs are at times clearly humanised. For example, dogs are often described as "laughing", they seem to have a sense of morality and take calculated revenge on both each other and humans, perhaps most notable in the final chapter of *The Call of the Wild*, where Buck discovers that members of a Native American tribe have killed his beloved master and proceeds to attack and kill them as punishment.

The dogs also develop through conventionally human story arcs that fit within an American tradition of storytelling – *The Call of the Wild* resembles books as different as Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, where the protagonist returns to nature in order to find himself (Kelly viii). *White Fang*, on the other hand, can be compared to a bildungsroman where the protagonist grows up and must develop from a feral, ill-treated puppy into a mature, loving dog. The results are canine characters interestingly positioned between human reasoning and strict animal instinct, often crossing over into one or the other. While the anthropomorphism they possess might challenge their authenticity as non-human animals, it also serves the function of personifying them and building sympathy for the reader

to engage with.

While the two novels have several things in common with “To Build a Fire”, it is also important to stress the differences between them. Except for the obvious difference in length, *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* are also undoubtedly stories with dogs at their absolute core. “To Build a Fire” is first and foremost a story of a man and his downfall, where a dog plays a central part but does not appear in the main role. Stretches of the story are told without mentioning the dog, and it is not subject to the same individual development as Buck or White Fang, meaning much of the problems of anthropomorphism seen in the two novels is not present in the short story. However, the nameless dog still fits into the universe London builds up in the two novels, by confirming the same ideas of man-dog relationships. Being aware of London’s previous writing concerning dog characters also provides an important context for thinking about and analysing the nameless dog of “To Build a Fire”.

2. The Real Dog: Symbolism and Parallel Fates

Attributed with both positive and negative qualities, dogs frequently function as symbols in literature. As they are associated with traits such as loyalty, friendship and undying love, they often feature as heroes, and it is a common motif to have dogs save human lives or travel vast distances to be reunited with their owners – Eric Knight’s *Lassie Come Home* might be one of the most well-known examples. However, due to the aforementioned negative traits the opposite is also possible, with dogs becoming symbols of death and sickness, one example being Stephen King’s *Cujo*. Dogs also stand in close relation to wolves, an animal historically associated with a plethora of negative traits and closely connected to the unknown wilderness. Thus, dogs carry connotations both to nature and civilisation, and to wilderness and domestication, resulting in a dichotomy that allows them to straddle these boundaries and sometimes move back and forth between them. London’s dogs are good examples of canine characters that exhibit these dichotomies, with both Buck and White Fang crossing over from wilderness to civilisation and vice versa. The dog of “To Build a Fire” also possesses this double-edged nature, which I will take a closer look at in this chapter.

When it comes to London’s dogs, McGill states that “there is a recurring habit in London studies of reading his nonhuman characters as the ‘stand-ins for something else’” (85), a habit implying that only human experience can be complex and worth writing about. Earl J. Wilcox, for example, writes in his 1969 essay on *The Call of the Wild*: “if London were not drawing inferences about man in his ‘dog-heroes,’ his entire literary career, particularly in relationship to the naturalistic movement, is called into question” (qtd. in McGill 85). Readings of London’s dogs as “men in fur” also include Mark Seltzer’s Marxist interpretation of the sled-dogs as allegories for human laborers (McGill 87). The dog in “To Build a Fire” might too be easily read as a symbol, either for wilderness in contrast to civilisation as represented by the man, or the instinct that the man has lost his own connection to. Reading animals as mere symbols, however, assumes that their lives are not meaningful enough on their own to create narratives about. In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida writes of animal symbolism:

... the cat that looks at me in my bedroom or bathroom ... does not appear here to represent, like an ambassador, the immense symbolic responsibility with which our culture has always charged the feline race ... If I say ‘it is a real cat’ that sees me naked, this is in order to mark its unsubstitutable singularity. (9)

Animal symbolism, then, is problematic in that it denies animal characters subjectivity, making them mere objects used to think about human activity, rather than subjects capable of intent and action. While reading the dog of “To Build a Fire” as a symbol might be a meaningful analysis in its own way, it becomes a lot more interesting as a character if regarded as a sentient, intentional agent. It is also notable that London wrote numerous other naturalist works centred around human characters, and thus the choice of animals for his dog novels is a conscious one and they should arguably be read on those terms.

In “To Build a Fire”, the dog is not constantly present; instead the reader is alerted to it at certain times between intervals where the nameless man is the main focus. Over the story’s roughly 14 pages, there are 12 sections where the dog appears, although its presence is felt even as it is not mentioned. The sections increase slightly both in number and length as the story progresses, thus also increasing the intensity of the animal presence.

For the first two pages of the story, the man appears alone, and the dog is mentioned first with a description of appearance: “At the man’s heels trotted a dog, a big native husky, the proper wolf-dog, gray-coated and without any visible or temperamental difference from its brother, the wild wolf” (London 11). The appearance of the dog is important, both to a symbolical and a non-symbolical reading, since its wolfish looks ties it to the wilderness and therefore also to the ability of surviving in the environment where the story is set. Already, it is indicated that the dog is not a typical domesticated canine, that it belongs to the land and that its allegiances might not fully lie with the human it is accompanying. It is not a stretch to imagine that the story might have ended differently if the dog was a recognizable domesticated breed, connected to human civilisation, or a breed known for rescuing and aiding humans – such as the St. Bernard, which notably was one of London’s choices for the crossbred Buck of *The Call of the Wild* (who also does save his master’s life on more than one occasion).

The dog of “To Build a Fire” is easier likened to White Fang, whom it resembles both in appearance and heredity. However, the dog in the short story is arguably depicted as more “animal” than either Buck or White Fang, since the narrator takes on a more distanced stance towards it. The third-person narrator makes a point of never humanising it, referring to its instincts almost immediately after introducing it:

The dog did not know anything about thermometers. Possibly in its brain there was no sharp consciousness of a condition of very cold such as was in the man’s brain. But the brute had its instinct. It experienced a vague but menacing apprehension that subdued it and made it slink along at the man’s heels, and that made it question eagerly every unwonted movement of the man as if expecting him to go into camp or to seek shelter and build a fire. (11)

The technique is similar to that which is used in *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*, however it does not clash with the events of the short story the same way as in the novels, since the dog here is not the main character, and there is not the same effort of building sympathy for it. The reader is instead encouraged to view the dog as unfeeling and cold, in symbiosis with the landscape. However, while a reading of the dog as a personification or a symbol of the unforgiving nature to which the man perishes is an interpretation that lies close at hand, it is also one that greatly diminishes the dog's role. While the setting of the frozen Yukon river is the premise for the entire story and provides the conflict of it, it also dictates the relationship between the dog and the man. It is important to recognize that the man moves in the environment as an oblivious intruder, while the dog truly belongs there. Thus, the dog is rather an inhabitant of the environment than an extension or a symbol of it, while the man is a trespasser in the dog's world, a notion that fits with London's naturalist themes as well as his recurring depictions of nature where the strong and adaptable survive while the weak perish.

In fact, one of the most interesting aspects of the dog motif in "To Build a Fire" is that it rejects the common trope of the faithful, loyal dog. A reader unfamiliar with the story might expect the dog to save the man in some way, by running for help or keeping him warm, but in the story, there is not the slightest hint at any such relationship. Instead, when the dog is not subdued, it takes on a coolly observing role that borders on a mockery of the man's shortcomings. This, however, is completely in line with London's universe of human-canine relationships, where it seems a rule that humans need to earn the love and loyalty of their dogs. Both Buck and White Fang have their fair share of incompetent or abusive owners before ultimately ending up with a "worthy" master. The relationship between the dog and the man in the short story is described in one paragraph:

On the other hand, there was no keen intimacy between the dog and the man. The one was the toil-slave of the other, and the only caresses it had ever received were the caresses of the whip-lash and of harsh and menacing throat-sounds that threatened the whip-lash. So the dog made no effort to communicate its apprehension to the man. It was not concerned in the welfare of the man; it was for its own sake that it yearned back towards the fire. (14)

The excerpt cements the power relationship between the two characters, but also shows the man in the story as an undeserving recipient of the dog's loyalty. This is partly because he does not treat the dog well, but perhaps even more because of his incompetence, commented on and harshly judged throughout the story by the narrator, and pitted against the dog's natural competence of instinct. The first time the dog is mentioned, it is described as "depressed by the

tremendous cold” (11) and it is in connection to the dog that the titular phrase “to build a fire” is first used, attributing it as a thought of the dog far before it becomes a concern for the man.

The depiction of the dog as more keenly aware of its surroundings and the likely dangers of them contrasts with the man’s disregard for the same, perhaps most obvious in the following excerpt: “The dog dropped in again at his heels, with a tail drooping discouragement, as the man swung along the creek-bed” (11). Here, the reader is alerted to the dog’s body language, and it is juxtaposed to the man’s, who “swung along”, almost cheerfully, and the description further solidifies the feeling of danger which the man is oblivious to. It also adds to the characterization of the man as someone unable to read the signs around him. It is stated early on that “the trouble with him was that he was without imagination. He was quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances” (10), and he fails to realize the meaning of the cold and to imagine the effects of it. Neither the body language of the dog, nor the fact that his spittle freezes mid-air makes any impression on him, despite being clear indicators of the danger he is in.

While the relationship between the man and the dog in terms of their knowledge is a contrasting one, the story also presents them as parallel to each other. Repetition is one of the most prominent themes in the short story, as noted by Mitchell: “... the plot itself consists of only a few basic events reiterated over and over ... Banal as these events are one by one, they repeat themselves into an eerie significance as the man attempts again and again to enact the story’s titular infinitive” (36-37). While the attempts at building a fire are the most prominent repetitions, they are also realised through other repetitive events: walking through a landscape that seems unchanging and constant, the numerous occasions when the man encounters the traps of weak ice, multiple and similar descriptions of the cold, of the man’s body and the recurring sections of the dog. Chosen phrases and words, such as “cold” are also repeated (“cold” appearing no less than 36 times), and combined, they make for a story depicting an environment that resists human intention (Mitchell 39). Also notable is that the narrative of the story is in itself circular, depicting the rise and fall of the man from dawn to dusk, beginning at first daylight and closing at twilight.

This theme of repetition is present also in the parallels between the man and the dog. Their appearances are described back to back, with particular emphasis on the frost their faces are covered in due to their crystallised breath. The perhaps most notable parallel however, occurs when the man pushes the dog forward to test the ice, and it breaks through, wetting its forefeet much in the same fashion that the man will do later (London 13). However, the function of these parallels seems to be to highlight the differences between the man and the dog, as the

dog is much more adapted to the cold than the man. As the water on its legs immediately turns to ice, the dog lies down to bite away the chunks between its toes:

This was a matter of instinct. To permit the ice to remain would mean sore feet. It did not know this. It merely obeyed the mysterious prompting that arose from the deep crypts of its being. But the man knew, having achieved a judgement on the subject, and he removed the mitten from his right hand and helped tear out the ice particles. (13)

Here, a stark contrast is made between the dog's instinct and the man's judgment. This is also the only time that the man helps the dog or there is any collaboration between them. But the action also serves for the man to expose his hand and to be astonished by the cold, for the first time feeling it upon his bare skin. More than once the dog is used to draw attention to the cold in this manner, or for its instincts to be pitted against the man's judgment and experience. The dynamic of their relationship begins to change after the man himself wets his feet, a change fuelled by the growing presence of the animal gaze.

3: Wistful Eyes: The Power of the Animal Gaze

Writing of the animal gaze, Berger states that “man becomes aware of himself returning the look” (5), a notion that also Derrida confirms, writing: “The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there” (29). The idea of becoming aware of human self and identity through the gaze of an animal is central not only to human-animal studies, where animals provide a contrast by which we can call ourselves human, but also to “To Build a Fire”, in which the dog provides that same contrast. In the story, the dog serves to juxtapose the human against the animal and judgment to instinct, a function that becomes more pronounced as the story progresses and the differences between them begin to also mark the difference between survival and death. As the dog’s power over the situation becomes increasingly notable, so does its presence in the story, and as it watches the man perish there is, despite the dog’s lack of speech, almost a conversation between the two where the dog seems to judge and perhaps even mock the man for his inadequacy.

While it can be argued that the dog passes a form of judgment throughout the story by having a better conception than the man of what it means to be travelling in the cold, it becomes explicitly expressed only when it is noted that it watches the man. The first time it is described as watching him coincides with the turning point of the story, when the man’s fire is blotted out. As the man starts to panic and tries to build a second fire with hands too numb to grasp anything, the reader’s attention is turned to the dog: “And all the while the dog sat and watched him, a certain yearning wistfulness in its eyes, for it looked upon him as the fire provider, and the fire was slow in coming” (London 17). As the dog shows that it is getting impatient, this demands from the man what he is unable to provide even for himself, judging him as “slow”. In this excerpt, it is also apparent that the dog does not comprehend that the man is in danger, or possibly does but does not care. While the man reacts as if “he had just heard his own sentence of death” (17), the dog is only described as impatient that the man is slow in building the fire. Besides further inverting the trope of the faithful dog, this also highlights the difference between the man and the dog, marking the dog’s animal otherness, this time not only physically but also mentally.

The term “fire-provider” also appears for the first time in this section. It is a word which seems to belong to the dog and suggests the possibility that we are in the consciousness of the dog, but it also makes clear to the reader that the dog does not view the man as anything other

than the provider of warmth and food. The word is used to cement the understanding that there is no affection between the dog and the man but is also interesting for two other reasons: it gives an insight into the dog's mind and perhaps its language but is also used to reduce the man to a mere function – and at that, a function he cannot fulfil. Interestingly, the word is used again shortly after but this time, not directly in connection to the dog but commented by the narrator: “Each twig gushed a puff of smoke and went out. The fire-provider had failed” (19). It is recognized that the man has been reduced to one crucial ability, both by the dog and by the situation, and the identity of “fire provider” is the only one that matters. The fact that the man has taken on the identity ascribed to him by the dog also reinforces Berger and Derrida's idea of acquiring identity through the animal gaze.

As the man continues to scramble to make the second fire, the dog continues to watch him, and the gaze becomes not only judgemental but also mocking:

... all the while the dog sat in the snow, its wolf brush of a tail curled around warmly over its forefeet, its sharp wolf ears pricked forward as it watched the man. And the man, as he beat and threshed with his arms and hands, felt a great surge of envy as he regarded the creature that was warm and secure in its natural covering. (17-18)

The differences between the man and the dog is further emphasised, and as the man must wildly move about to keep warm, the dog goes from an object, almost a tool that he owns, to both a subject of envy and a presence that judges him. Despite having no access to human language, the dog seems to comment on the man's actions by watching him and waiting for the fire he cannot produce. The lack of empathy and ability to help from the dog appears increasingly frustrating and gives even more power to the gaze of the animal as blatantly non-human, as definite Other, and as the dog remains chillingly calm and collected, the shift in power becomes noticeable. Both the gaze and the power that belongs to the dog is accurately described by Berger:

[The animal] does not reserve a special look for man. But by no other species except man will the animal's look be recognized as familiar. Other animals are held by the look. The man becomes aware of himself returning the look. The animal scrutinises him across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension. This is why the man can surprise the animal. Yet the animal – even if domesticated – can also surprise the man. The man too is looking across a similar, but not identical, abyss of non-comprehension ... And so, when he is *being seen* by the animal, he is being seen as his surroundings are seen by him. His recognition of this is what makes the look of the animal familiar. And yet the animal is distinct, and can never be confused with man. Thus, a power is ascribed to the animal, comparable with human power but never coinciding with it. (5)

Berger's use of the word "looking" instead of "seeing" implies that there is an exchange, a consciousness looking back at the man, and as the man in the story, in Berger's words, becomes aware of himself returning the look, it means becoming aware of both difference and likeness to the dog. As he meets the gaze of the dog, he becomes aware of his own human identity and his shortcomings as such; the things he thought would save him – his intellect, experience and judgment – have been proven useless while the dog's natural instinct and fur have proven superior. However, in meeting the dog's gaze he is also reminded of what connects human and animal lives, namely mortality.

Berger also speaks of power and how it is inherent to animals because of their distinctiveness from humans. This is true for "To Build a Fire" since the animal traits are what gives the dog power over both the man and the situation, but also becomes increasingly true as the story progresses. It is the dog's distinctiveness from the man that becomes the crucial difference between survival and death, and as the man looks at the dog this is what dawns upon him. It also leads to the measuring of strength that confirms the dog as the stronger individual, appearing in the longest section involving the dog:

As he looked apathetically about him, his eyes chanced on the dog, sitting across the ruins of the fire from him, in the snow, making restless, hunching movements, slightly lifting one forefoot and then the other, shifting its weight back and forth on them with wistful eagerness.

The sight of the dog put a wild idea into his head. He remembered the tale of the man, caught in a blizzard, who killed a steer and crawled into the carcass, and so was saved. He would kill the dog and bury his hands in the warm body until the numbness went out of them. Then he could build another fire. (19)

The unsettling view of the dog as simply means for the man to warm his hands speaks of the man's desperation, but also of denial of his impending fate. He tries to return to the view of the dog as a tool he owns, but as he tries to call the dog to him, it senses that something is off and refuses to come. The man tries to crawl towards it, and the dog slides away. Only when the man gets to his feet and orders the dog to him, it complies, but the man has forgotten that his hands are numb and can only throw his arms around the dog and hold it against his body:

But it was all he could do, hold its body encircled in his arms and sit there. He realized that he could not kill the dog. There was no way to do it. With his helpless hands he could neither draw nor hold his sheath knife nor throttle the animal. He released it, and it plunged wildly away, with tail between its legs, and still snarling. It halted forty feet away and surveyed him curiously, with ears sharply pricked forward. (20)

As it becomes apparent both to the reader and to the man that he has no way of hurting or imposing his will upon the dog anymore, the dog takes on a new identity – it is untouchable

and becomes both more Other in its effortless way of surviving in the cold, and more alike the man as it now possesses the same amount of integrity and power. For the man, his inability to kill the dog means a further realization of imminent death, and as a result he is gripped by panic. He starts running along the trail in a vain attempt at reaching camp, as well as in an effort to keep warm. The dog falls in behind him and keeps up with him, another act that seem to mock the man's shortcomings and in which the dog becomes an unnerving presence that, by its almost invincible manners, contrasts with the dying man:

And all the time the dog ran with him, at his heels. When he fell down a second time, it curled its tail over its forefeet and sat in front of him, facing him, curiously eager and intent. The warmth and security of the animal angered him, and he cursed it till it flattened down its ears appeasingly. (21)

The dog continues to watch the man as he freezes to death, supposedly still demanding the fire the man is unable to provide. Its hovering above the man is ominous, a further reminder of its Otherness. When the man has died, the perspective shifts from the man to the dog:

The dog sat facing him and waiting. The brief day drew to a close in a long, slow twilight. There were no signs of a fire to be made, and, besides, never in the dog's experience had it known a man to sit like that in the snow and make no fire. As the twilight grew on, its eager yearning for the fire mastered it, and with a great lifting and shifting of forefeet, it whined softly, then flattened its ears in anticipation of being chidden by the man. But the man remained silent. Later, the dog whined loudly. And still later it crept close to the man and caught the scent of death. This made the animal bristle and back away. A little longer it delayed, howling under the stars that leaped and danced and shone brightly in the cold sky. Then it turned and trotted up the trail in the direction of the camp it knew, where were the other food-providers and fire-providers. (22)

While the closing scene is unnerving, it also suggests freedom for the dog, which when howling and looking up at the stars appears freer and more in connection with its surroundings than before. The ending sentence can be viewed as blunt, but as we are now entirely in the dog's mind, it signifies not only the dog's lack of affection for the man but also its capability of taking on the trail that killed the man, seemingly without effort. This further drives home the point of the dog as belonging to the setting in a way the man never did.

As for the dog's howling, it might be easy to interpret the act as one of mourning, but as the story has continually proven there is no affection between the man and the dog, the howling dog instead takes on the image of the wild wolf, now resembling it more than ever before. Thus, the dog moves closer to the border of wilderness, but never passes over. Instead it chooses to return to the camp, continuing to tread the thin line between civilisation and wilderness.

Conclusion

By exploring Jack London's "To Build a Fire" from a human-animal studies point of view, this essay has focused on the nameless dog in the story in order to explore its role and the implications of the animal gaze. My thesis is that the story uses the animal gaze to build a changing power relationship between the man and the dog characters, at the same time proving the dog as an agent rather than symbol.

To present my argument, I have tried to show how the dog connects to traditional views of dog symbolism as well as to London's dog novels *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*. While some of the traits ascribed to the dog might easily lead to a reading of it as a symbol for nature or instinct, this essay argues that the dog resists these notions. The story inverts the common trope of the faithful dog, instead presenting the dog as an animal acting in self-interest and out of survival instinct rather than out of loyalty or affection. I also argue that the dog's connection to nature and wilderness is a product of it belonging to that environment rather than it being a symbol or extension of the same. These ideas align with London's previous writing on dog characters, where humans must earn the love and loyalty of their dogs and where setting is used as a place for survival and measuring of strength.

The story also uses the dog to build contrast between the two characters in order to prove the man incompetent. The story does so partly by having the dog and the man use their body languages differently, by juxtaposing the dog's instinct to the man's judgment, and by building their fates as parallel to each other. The parallels between them also fit within the narrative of the story as circular and repetitive.

Leaning on the ideas of John Berger and Jacques Derrida, I have also attempted to explore the presence of the animal gaze and what it means for the story in terms of power and agency. As the story progresses and the man's situation worsens, the power within the relationship shifts, something that is shown through and perhaps partly caused by the dog watching the man. In watching him, it questions his ability and therefore also his power, eventually ascribing an identity to the man which he takes on. The gaze of the dog serves to emphasise the contrast between them even further, where the difference between man and dog grows to become the difference between life and death. As both Berger and Derrida argue, man becomes aware of himself in returning the look of an animal (Berger 5, Derrida 29) an assumption that rings true in the short story as the man becomes aware not only of his fragile human identity by meeting the gaze of the dog, but also is reminded of his own mortality.

In his vain attempt at killing the dog, the man engages in a power struggle with the dog which he inevitably loses, proving the dog's superiority and elevating it to a complete Otherness that results in a demanding animal presence, as the dog sits and coolly watches the man as he freezes to death.

While it is certainly possible to read the dog as a symbol, I believe that it is a reading that greatly diminishes the role of the dog as well as fails to take into consideration London's documented interest in canine characters. As he made deliberate choices to write of nonhumans, it is far more productive and interesting to read them as such, instead of viewing them as allegorical. In its rejection of common canine tropes as well as in its use of the animal gaze, "To Build a Fire" heavily implies the dog as an agent rather than a symbol or a secondary character without any implications on the story. In juxtaposing the dog to the man, the story effectively discusses instinct versus judgment, and in having the dog watch and demand fire from the man, the dog is elevated to a character with power and agency, making the short story one that deals extensively with the relation between animality and humanity, and whatever break there is between the two.

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