

Essential Short Stories

**Teaching Unit**

# To Build a Fire

by Jack London

written by Denise Arnold

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## Biography

John (Jack) Griffith London (1876-1916) was an American author whose writings were heavily influenced by his life experiences and reflected the new respect for science of his day. Born in San Francisco, CA, and raised in Oakland, CA, London's early years were emotionally and financially difficult. His father abandoned the family when London was an infant.

After a series of odd jobs in his teen years and a failed attempt at selling his written work, London worked on commercial fishing vessels and then headed for the Yukon during the famed Gold Rush in the late 1890s. It was there that London amassed an abundance of experience and ideas and came of age as a writer. When he returned to Oakland, he re-launched his career. He became a popular novel and magazine writer and lecturer, but he was criticized for his political and social ideas.

His lecturing often kept him away from his wife and two children. During one of his lectures, he met and fell in love with another woman. Soon after, he divorced his wife to marry her.

London was so struck with life in the Klondike that his experiences there colored much of his work, especially his fiction. His most celebrated novels, *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* and his most famous short story, "To Build a Fire," reflect a recurring theme in his writing: man is in a constant struggle with himself and nature, guided only by his senses and little knowledge. London's writing style is stark, straightforward, and objective, echoing realism and naturalism, the literary movements of his day. In an attempt to portray life as it actually is, London depicts it as accurately as possible as a detached observer—not involving any of his own biases or emotions.

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## Background

The Klondike is an area of the Yukon in northwest Canada, part of a sub-arctic region. The terrain is rugged, and the weather is harsh. Winter lasts seven months, most of them sunless, with temperatures often lower than fifty degrees below zero.

In 1896, gold was discovered in the Klondike. When news of the gold strike spread to the rest of the world almost a year later, the region was overrun with prospectors. Many of them died from the cruel and difficult natural elements. Hardly any of the survivors made a fortune.

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## Plot Summary

During the Klondike gold rush, a man and a dog journey several miles on foot to an encampment on the left fork of Henderson Creek, where the man intends to mine for gold. The man thinks it is only fifty-five degrees below zero, but in reality, it is much colder. He is traveling during the time of year when the sun barely rises above the horizon. The man belittles the earlier warnings of more experienced men. The dog knows it is too cold to be traveling, but it has been trained to follow orders. The man considers the cold only an inconvenience and believes that all he has to do to reach his destination is keep moving, keep warm, and stay dry.

As the man walks, he tries to avoid hidden springs below the snow-covered ground. At one point, he senses that the path might be dangerous, and he makes the dog go first. The ground gives way, and the dog falls in to water up to its forelegs. It immediately begins to bite and lick the quickly forming ice off its paws. The man is making good time and feels so good that at noon he decides to stop for lunch, which he carries with him close to his chest. He builds a fire, takes a long break, and then begins walking again.

Eventually, the man accidentally steps into a spring, wetting his clothing and himself up to his knees. Once he climbs out, he builds a fire under a spruce tree to dry out his clothing and thaw his frozen hands and feet. The fire is roaring, and the man is happy with himself. Unexpectedly, the fire is doused by snow that falls suddenly from tree branches above. He hastily tries to build a new fire in a better location, but his fingers and hands quickly become numb. At first, he cannot light the matches. Then, he succeeds, but his frozen fingers extinguish the fire because he clumsily drops wet kindling on it. He realizes he is quickly losing the battle with the cold.

After failing to start the fire, the man decides to kill the dog so that he can warm himself inside its body, but as he approaches the dog, it senses danger and backs away. The man finally grabs the dog, but his frozen hands are useless, and he realizes that he will not be able to kill it. In a panic, the man begins to run toward the encampment, hoping the movement will bring feeling back to his feet and hands. As he does this, he slowly starts feeling the tingling of warmth, but soon comes to the conclusion that he does not have the endurance to keep up the pace.

At last, the man decides to accept the fact that he will freeze to death, and he surrenders to the sleepiness that overcomes him as he dies. The dog stays with him until it realizes that the man is dead, and then it moves on to search for others who can provide food and a fire.

# To Build a Fire

## Vocabulary

*Allegiance* – loyalty

*Anesthetic* – something that causes a loss of consciousness and/or pain

*Appeasingly* – yieldingly

*Apprehension* – worry

*Conflagration* – a large, strong fire

*Excruciating* – unbearably painful or intense

*Faint* – difficult to see

*Floundered* – stumbled

*Frailty* – weakness

*Intimacy* – closeness

*Menacing* – threatening

*Niggerheads* – hearty grass that grows in the tundra region

*Orb* – a sphere

*Pall* – a covering

*Prompting* – suggesting or a suggestion

*Singed* – burned slightly

*Threshing* – beating

*Winged Mercury* – a messenger god in Roman mythology

# To Build a Fire

## Study Guide

1. The story is set in the Klondike region of the Yukon Territory. How does London describe it?  
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2. How is the day described, and what mood is set by this description?  
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3. The man's conflict with nature is demonstrated by the challenges and obstacles he encounters and his responses to them. What are some examples of this conflict?  
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4. The story is told from a third-person omniscient point of view, which gives the reader insight into the characteristics and thoughts of both the man and the dog. The man is revealed to be shallow, overconfident, arrogant, and ignorant. Cite some examples of the narrator's comments that illustrate these traits.  
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5. How does London use the man and the dog to illustrate the juxtaposition between instinct and knowledge?  
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