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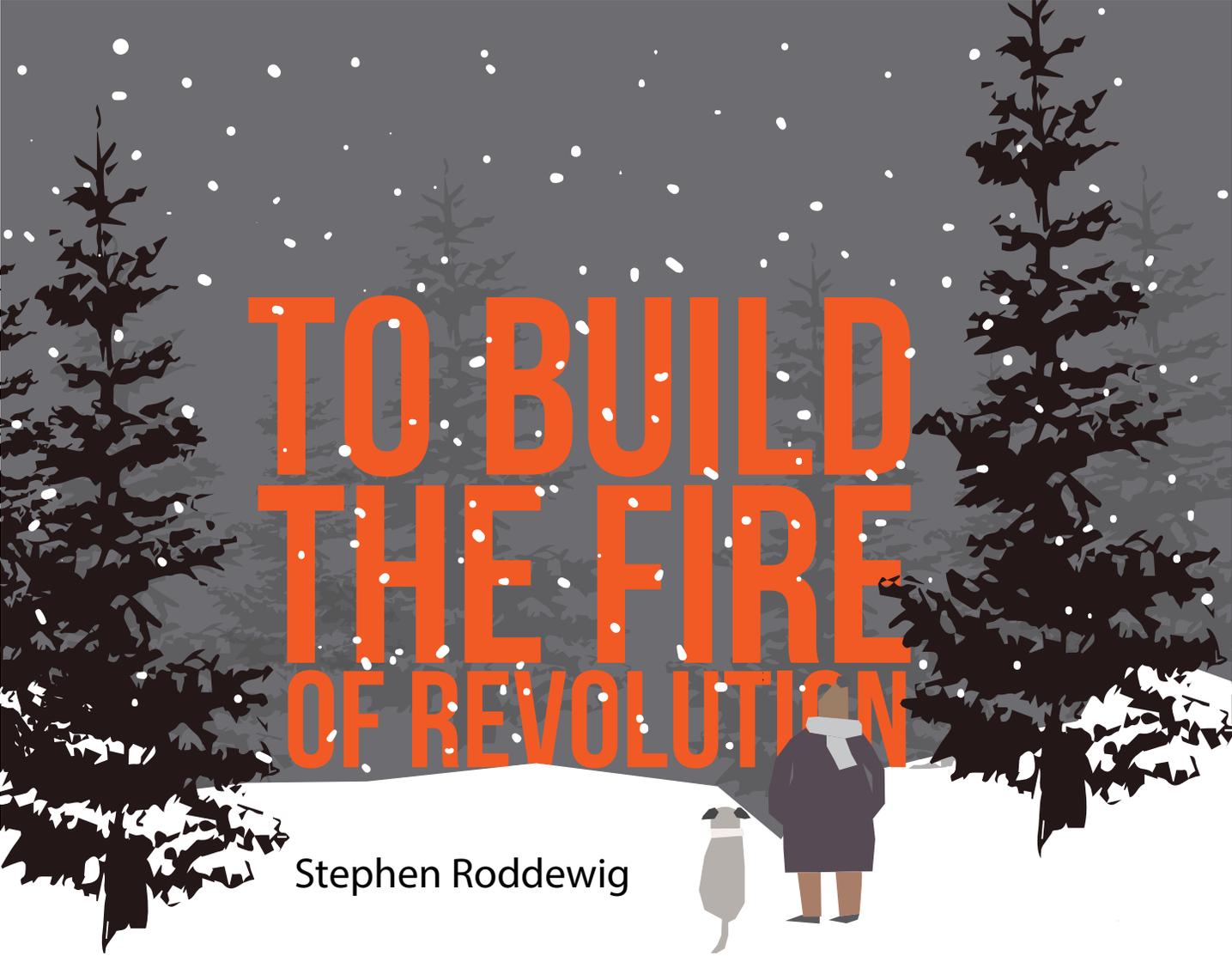
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TO BUILD THE FIRE OF REVOLUTION

Stephen Roddewig

Scholarly examinations of naturalism in Jack London's 1908 short story "To Build a Fire" often overlook the influence of the socialist political movement. After surveying the American Socialist Party movement and London's activism in "How I Became a Socialist," this essay uses the frame of Marxist rhetorical criticism to inspect sociopolitical themes in London's famous story. London's critiques of Individualism in "How I Became a Socialist" parallel one of his concerns in "To Build a Fire" as his unnamed protagonist progresses through the Yukon with the larger ideals of American society and the capitalist economy guiding his actions. Although masculinity, individualism, environmental dominance, and capitalist commodification lead the character to believe he can succeed, his slow death represents an implicit critique of Western culture and its ideologies.

ABSTRACT

Jack London's renowned short story "To Build a Fire" features the brutal fate of an unnamed protagonist fighting against the elements in the frozen Yukon at seventy-five degrees below zero. Published in 1908, the work serves as a prime example of naturalist writing by showcasing a hostile world that threatens to kill with indifference. However, the story ranges beyond the naturalist emphasis on the physical significance of man's fight for survival into veiled socialist themes. Examined through the lens of Marxist ideology, which guided socialist movements at the turn of the century, and London's own beliefs, "To Build a Fire" critiques Western culture's encompassing ideologies: individualism, masculinity, environmental domination, and even classical capitalism during the period of the rising American Socialist Party and the broader Progressive Movement.

PHYSICAL SIGNIFICANCE VERSUS SOCIALIST THEMES

One criticism of contemporary interpretations of London's short story is scholars' attempts to place "To Build a Fire" into metaphysical categories, thus creating new significance for the tale in the high-vaulted ideas of philosophy, a pitfall I will avoid in my own analysis. As described by Charles May in his essay "'To Build a Fire': Physical Fiction and Metaphysical Critiques," once a critic has chosen a grouping, "If the work fits, even in the coarsest fashion, with... limbs lopped off, it is declared to have value because the category does" (19). With the bloody imagery of amputating a work to fit it into a category, May makes it abundantly clear that he disapproves of such a practice.

This distaste drives May's larger argument that London's short story contains significance as a work of physical fiction, not in the abstract categories of theories. The assertion is articulated in a passage that derides a conventional idea that the protagonist's nameless identity shows that he represents the "Everyman," a character that stems from sixteenth century plays as a metaphor for the soul (22). May rejects such an existential theme in the story, favoring the naturalist interpretation which asserts humans' close relations to animals: "a naturalistic version of Everyman is simply Everyman as a body. And this is precisely what the protagonist is in London's story, and it is why the story has physical significance only" (22). The importance of this assertion lies in the final clauses, where May unflinchingly declares that "To Build a Fire" contains "physical significance only," equating it to the surface story of a man's struggle and eventual death at the hands of nature without any underlying philosophies (22).

I, however, will contradict May's argument, and assert that to declare London's work as significant only in its

physical setting and hardships constitutes reductionism. Such a simplification loses sight of both the historical context of 1908 and London's own experiences. Indeed, to reduce London's work to the label of physical fiction is to simply place it into another such category, albeit one less hypothetical than the metaphysical interpretations.

I do not mean to assert that "To Build a Fire" is an artifact of socialist propaganda or that the ideology is the explicit impetus for its creation. To do so would reduce London's work to another schema: the Marxist category. If the author sought to promote such a worldview, spending paragraphs describing the cold and his character's attempts to light a fire would not improve the work's efficacy, especially if the explicit purpose was to promote a critique of capitalism. However, several themes within the story coincide with Marx's criticisms of Western culture, and these themes form an undercurrent to the story as a whole.

"To Build a Fire" critiques Western culture's encompassing ideologies: individualism, masculinity, environmental domination, and even classic capitalism.

Marxism itself purports to be grounded in the material world, which complements May's argument that "To Build a Fire" is centered in the concrete. The followers of the ideology focus on the mode of production, which decides how resources are used and how material goods are distributed in a society. According to Marx, the consciousness of humanity itself is rooted in the material world. In early history, the method of survival defined how humans categorized the world about them (Collins and Makowsky 34-35).

This logic is applied to the modern capitalist system, to which humans now turn to meet their basic needs. Marxism argues that the economy perpetuates worldviews based on economic position or class, termed "class consciousness." The culture that guides worldview is advocated by those in power to perpetuate the system. As written in *The Communist Manifesto*, "The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class" (Marx and Engels). Thus, ideas of individualism, masculinity, environmental domination, and wealth accumulation proliferate through society, driving us to work harder in the economic system. More than a century after London published "To Build a Fire," these mindsets remain in American culture just as they appear in the short story despite the efforts of socialist movements in the past century.

I therefore suggest an alternative perspective on “To Build a Fire” that both supports May’s physical emphasis and engages with the metaphysical ideologies of individualism, masculinity, and environmental domination present in the story. Reinforced by an exploration of biographical and historical context, I will offer a more comprehensive picture of the socialist themes within the tale beyond its well-established naturalist themes.

SOCIALIST BACKGROUND OF “TO BUILD A FIRE”

“To Build a Fire” was published in 1908, during the height of the Progressive Movement. The political initiative is remembered for curtailing the power of big business and supporting unionism, exemplified by federal actions against the large monopolies that had dominated the Gilded Age of the previous century. Reformism became a political movement under progressivism, as Robert Wiebe writes in his essay “Business Disunity and the Progressive Movement, 1901-1914”: “the widespread desire for reform gained respectability and momentum during the Roosevelt administration, grew restive in the interlude of William Howard Taft’s presidency, and finally culminated in Woodrow Wilson’s New Freedom” (665). The desire for change took more radical political forms in leftist camps.

Amid the larger movement against marketplace domination, the American Socialist Party was founded in 1901, according to *The American Socialist Movement (1897-1912)* by Ira Kipnis. Over the years, many have shrugged off the recurring socialist movements of the 20th century as mere reactionary groups and anarchists, but Kipnis argues that the socialist party of the turn of the century cannot be shrugged into obscurity:

“The American Socialist Party cannot be so easily dismissed. At the height of its power it had over one hundred and fifty thousand dues-paying members, published hundreds of newspapers, won almost a million votes for its presidential candidate, elected more than a thousand of its members to political office, secured passage of a considerable body of legislation, won the support of one third of the American Federation of Labor, and was instrumental in organizing the Industrial Workers of the World” (5).

Clearly, for its brief historical moment, the American Socialist Party wielded palpable influence. The party represented values found not only in the political sphere, but the cultural arena, as Kipnis states: “the Socialist Party should be studied both as a political party and as a social movement” (5). As seen with the more moderate Progressive Movement, the political agenda of the socialist party reflected and harnessed the sentiments of dissatisfied social groups. Literature has served as a

vehicle for both forms of organization, capturing cultural ideals, as demonstrated in Zora Neale Hurston’s “The Eatonville Anthology,” and political calls, exemplified in the infamous satire “A Modest Proposal” by Jonathan Swift.

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Kipnis concludes the introduction of his book on the history of the party by declaring, “To dismiss the advocates of socialism... is to ignore the great social unrest of the twentieth century and the real gains made by their party” (5). With a strong membership base and an impressive number of votes for presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs, the American Socialist Party harnessed the reformist sentiments of a growing sector of the American public. An even larger swath of the population desired more moderate change under the Progressive Movement, or “a more equitable balance of privilege and power in American society” (Wiebe 665).

LONDON’S SOCIALIST BIOGRAPHY

London joined the American Socialist Party in its first year of existence and discussed the subject in both his fiction and nonfiction. To understand the author’s reasons for his political stance and to identify themes found in “To Build a Fire,” I turn to London’s article “How I Became a Socialist,” first published in *The Comrade* monthly magazine in 1903 and collected in the provocatively-titled 1905 book *War of the Classes*. The anthology of political essays serves as an argument for the author’s beliefs, presenting both logical and anecdotal evidence as reinforcement. “How I Became a Socialist” follows the latter strategy, discussing London’s experiences as a young laborer and his discoveries as he traveled and observed the elderly, disabled, and unfit workers at the lowest rungs of society. The article employs pathos to gain the audience’s sympathy for both the author and the subjects of his writing.

London immediately highlights one of the common targets of socialist criticism in his opening passage: “I was very young and callow, did not know much of anything, and though I had never even heard of a school called ‘Individualism,’ I sang the paean of the strong with all my heart.” Describing his early life, London remarks, “I must confess I hardly thought of them at all, save that I vaguely felt that they, barring accidents, could be as good as I if they wanted to real hard, and could work just as well,” demonstrating that he never thought much of the poor

and the marginalized (“How I Became”). This passage highlights the central implication of Individualism.

Marxist theory drove the platforms and ideas of the socialist movements, which guided London’s ideas in the article. As evidence, Marx also addressed Individualism directly, arguing that the mindset places the blame solely on the individual for poverty and avoids any criticism of the larger economic system that created the conditions. Indeed, Marx argued that capitalism relies on the surplus army, a base of unemployed laborers that can be used to threaten unions and labor activists with replacement. Thus, poverty becomes a tool of the system to stamp out dissent, a method that Marxists argued capitalism perpetuated (Collins and Makowsky 41).

London continues to describe his early individualism, equating it to ideals of masculinity: “I was a rampant individualist. . . . Wherefore I called the game, as I saw it played, or thought I saw it played, a very proper game for MEN” (“How I Became”). London took pride in his physical labor, building a masculine image. Moreover, he believed that the purpose of life was to work hard: “In short, my joyous individualism was dominated by the orthodox bourgeois ethics. I read the bourgeois papers, listened to the bourgeois preachers” (“How I Became”). London demonstrates Marx’s theory of the ruling class’s dominance over ideas, describing how his beliefs in the merits of individualism originated in the surrounding culture.

London’s “bourgeois” views did not last, however: “I found there all sorts of men, many of whom had once been as good as myself . . . sailor-men, soldier-men, labor-men . . . twisted out of shape by toil and hardship and accident, and cast adrift by their masters like so many old horses” (“How I Became”). The author discusses the fear that he may find himself in the same state: “All my days I have worked hard with my body and according to the number of days I have worked, by just that much am I nearer the bottom of the Pit” (“How I Became”). London uses the imagery of the hole to describe the plight of the working class: trapped from the start.

For London, it was not socialism’s economic arguments or its broad concepts of class struggle that were convincing, but rather the concrete reality of laborers at the bottom of the socioeconomic pyramid. According to him, “no economic argument, no lucid demonstration of the logic and inevitableness of Socialism affects me as . . . when I first saw the walls of the Social Pit rise around me and felt myself slipping down, down, into the shambles at the bottom” (“How I Became”). Such a definitive declaration indicates that the socialist themes in his fiction should not be disregarded. Indeed, all the issues London explicitly engaged in his political writing appear implicitly in “To Build a Fire.”

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London did not embrace socialism solely in his personal writing, but also in his political activities and professional writing. According to Kipnis, London participated in the American Socialist Party’s intra-party politics: “Among those who engaged in ‘monstrous’ attacks upon the party policy of winning political office so that the state could conduct the gradual inauguration of socialism, few were as effective between 1905 and 1910 as Jack London” (298). London earned his place in the party’s official history as an active voice for socialism.

Even more revealing is London’s argument for a more radical approach than the leadership’s focus on elections to effect change from inside the American government. London advocated his vision with his most refined skill: writing. According to Kipnis, “perhaps the Left wing’s most effective single piece of propaganda was London’s novel, *The Iron Heel*, first published in 1907” (299). The novel’s plot leaves no question about the author’s beliefs, describing the “efforts of its hero, Ernest Everhard, to convince his fellow socialist leaders that while they talked of victory at the polls, a capitalist oligarchy, the *Iron Heel*, was destroying American democracy” (Kipnis 299). This blatant cultural commentary illustrates that London not only wrote about socialism, but also attempted to influence the platform of the larger American Socialist Party through his fiction.

BUILDING THE FIRE

Such a broad ideology as socialism may not appear evident when first reading London’s short story. One of the central themes supporting May’s assertion that London’s short story is significant for its physical fiction and not for any metaphysical symbolism is the protagonist’s focus on constructing a fire. The title of “To Build a Fire” bolsters the claim. But in the frigid setting of the Yukon, such an act means the survival or demise of a frail biological system, suggesting a form of symbolism that contradicts the reductionist strategy before the socialist themes even appear.

In the short story, the author introduces such a biological system: the unnamed protagonist, venturing boldly and confidently through the Yukon in Arctic winter. Though never explicitly stated, the character adopts the same

material focus as capitalism: “He was quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances. Fifty degrees below zero meant eighty-odd degrees of frost. Such fact impressed him as being cold and uncomfortable, and that was all” (“To Build”). Marxism also focuses on material conditions as the driver of human actions. However, the man sees only a cold tundra before him, while Marx saw the basis of consciousness derived from such environments (Collins and Makowsky 34). The protagonist has no such ruminations.

This individualist mindset, rooted in the capitalist ideal that declares every man will gain what his abilities merit, will lead to the protagonist's doom.

The man embodies the capitalist attitude of domination, material focus, and individualism. The third ideal is already embodied by the very plot of the story, which places him alone on a hostile tundra with only his strength to guide him. He is confident in his ability, “quick and alert,” resembling London’s description of working class laborers. The individualist theme is further reinforced by the man’s willingness to strike out on his own: “He was bound for the old claim on the left fork of Henderson Creek, where the boys were already. They had come over across the divide from the Indian Creek country, while he had come the roundabout way to take a look at the possibilities of getting out logs in the spring from the islands in the Yukon” (“To Build”). The man has abandoned the safety of the collective group, one of the basic blocks of socialist action, trusting in his individual abilities. This individualist mindset, rooted in the capitalist ideal that declares every man will gain what his abilities merit, will lead to the protagonist’s doom.

At first, the notion of capitalism and free market values operating at the northern tip of the world seem far-fetched, but, already, setting and point of view have proven that Individualist ideology guides the protagonist. Furthermore, the quotation above points to wealth accumulation as another motive. He abandons the company of “the boys” and ventures on a “roundabout” trek all for the sake of examining “the possibilities of getting out logs” for profit (“To Build”). The protagonist sees the world in material terms and acts on material needs.

From the capitalist view, nature is a space to be commodified and dominated for the purpose of production. The protagonist follows the ideal of

environmental domination, exemplified by his attitude toward his canine companion: “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” (“To Build”). The language of “toil-slave” and “whip-lash” further reinforce the image of nature’s creature bent to the will of the man through violence, a potent show of superiority.

However, the individual’s dominance over nature as a commodity does not last as the plot progresses. The man travels alongside the Yukon River until his foot punctures the ice. With his boots wet, the next moments prove critical if he is to save his feet from freezing. He builds a fire beneath a copse of pines, his confidence maintained: “Well, here he was; he had had the accident; he was alone; and he had saved himself” (“To Build”). The reader, at this point in the narrative, believes such a calm individual can succeed.

In his confidence, he even asserts the sexism that coincides with the other attitudes perpetuated by capitalism: “The old-timer had been very serious in laying down the law that no man must travel alone in the Klondike after fifty below. . . . Those old-timers were rather womanish, some of them, he thought. All a man had to do was to keep his head, and he was all right. Any man who was a man could travel alone” (“To Build”). The dichotomy is clear: strength belongs to a man who can “keep his head,” while any who encourage caution are “womanish,” implying that action is for the masculine (“To Build”).

The dichotomy is clear: strength belongs to a man who can "keep his head," while any who encourage caution are "womanish," implying that action is for the masculine.

The language of the protagonist mirrors that of London’s own reflections on individualism and masculinity as he experienced it in his work: “I called the game, as I saw it played, or thought I saw it played, a very proper game for MEN” (“How I Became”). The emphasis on “MEN” is revealing, implying that London related individualism, strength, and masculinity to being a physical laborer. In the economic culture that promotes the dichotomy between gender attitudes, it becomes plausible to imagine a young London declaring that any “man who was a man” could succeed by his will (“To Build”). But, as London discovered in his travels, strength is not the cure-all that Individualism expounds. The protagonist

realizes the same wisdom, but, unlike the author, his epiphany comes too late.

A wind blows, causing the canopy above the fire to shift and drop snow on the flames. The man attempts to rebuild the fire, but the cold has already seeped into his hands. He continues to fight against the elements as his fingers lose all feeling, until his second attempt at fire also fails. Eventually, the protagonist decides to face death with dignity, finally understanding the shortcoming of his individualistic ways: “You were right, old hoss; you were right,” the man mumbled to the old-timer of Sulphur Creek” (“To Build”). Having failed to reach the safety of the collective and knowing his fate, the man concedes the basic wisdom of socialism with his final breath.

Through its allusions to masculinity, individualism, environmental domination, and capitalism, the short story's ending contains an implicit critique of Western culture.

The foreboding tone of the narrative implies the man's efforts will fail from the start: “The cold of space smote the unprotected tip of the planet, and he, being on that unprotected tip, received the full force of the blow. The blood of his body recoiled before it” (“To Build”). Indeed, the capitalist themes found throughout the story, followed by their failure to preserve the man in the end, imply that a socialist critique operates beneath the surface plot. The same sense of inevitability pervades London's public reflection on his own birth into socialism, published five years before “To Build a Fire” in 1903. Referencing the days he spent working, he acknowledges that he is “nearer the bottom of the Pit” (“How I Became”). The Pit surrounds London's doomed protagonist from the beginning; it is represented by both the physical cold and the capitalist mindset that blinds him and guides him to his end.

CONCLUSION

Regarding London's short story “To Build a Fire” as significant only in its physical realities ignores its historical context and the biography of the writer himself. Instead, considering the Marxist perspective, which focuses on both material conditions and the social ideals they create, reveals the influence of broader socialist themes underneath the material realities of the frozen setting and the naturalist plot. Through its allusions to masculinity, individualism, environmental domination, and capitalism, the short story's ending contains an implicit critique of Western culture. Using similar contextual frameworks, Marxist theory offers a lens to

discover capitalist ideologies and their socialist critiques embedded in the fiction of socialist authors at the turn of the twentieth century.

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