

Human, Nature, and the Ring: Fire and Struggle in Jack London's Fiction

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Abstract: *This article examines Jack London's short stories The Game (1905) and To Build a Fire (1908) through the lens of literary naturalism and the concept of dignified defeat. It argues that London redefines heroism not as victory over external forces but as moral endurance in the face of inevitable failure. By juxtaposing human confrontation with nature and with another human opponent, the study demonstrates how London foregrounds inner strength, ethical resolve, and perseverance as central markers of human worth. Drawing on close textual analysis and contextualized within American naturalism, the article situates London's protagonists as figures who achieve moral triumph despite physical annihilation.*

Keywords: Jack London, American naturalism, man versus nature, heroism, dignified defeat

INTRODUCTION

Where does the boundary lie between human capability and endurance when an individual confronts fate? This question lies at the core of Jack London's fiction and finds particularly vivid expression in the short stories *The Game* and *To Build a Fire*. In both narratives, London places his protagonists in situations where defeat is almost inevitable, yet he challenges traditional literary assumptions that equate heroism with success or survival.

This article argues that London reconceptualizes heroism as a form of ethical and existential resistance. Victory, in these texts, is not determined by the final outcome but by the manner in which the struggle is undertaken. By analyzing the protagonists' confrontations with nature and with a human opponent, the study demonstrates that London's worldview privileges dignity, perseverance, and inner strength over physical triumph.

Theoretical Framework: Jack London and Literary Naturalism

Jack London is commonly associated with American literary naturalism, a movement influenced by Darwinian thought and characterized by an emphasis on determinism, environmental forces, and the limitations of human agency. Naturalist writers such as Émile Zola, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser depicted individuals as subject to overpowering social and natural forces. Within this framework, human beings often appear powerless, yet London complicates this determinism by foregrounding moral choice and personal dignity.

In London's fiction, nature is indifferent and often hostile, while fate operates as an impersonal force. However, London does not entirely negate human value. Instead, he suggests that human greatness manifests precisely in moments of resistance against inevitable loss. This perspective anticipates existentialist ideas later articulated in twentieth-century literature, particularly the notion that meaning arises through action rather than outcome.

Man and the Ring: Heroism in *The Game*

The Game narrates the final boxing match of Joe Fleming, for whom the ring represents far more than a sporting arena. The fight becomes a symbolic confrontation with physical limitation, fate, and personal principle. Fleming is fully aware of the risks involved, yet he chooses to enter the ring, accepting the possibility of death as the price of remaining true to his values: „In sore travail, gasping, reeling, panting, with glazing eyes and sobbing breath, grotesque and heroic, fighting to the last, striving to get at his antagonist, he surged and was driven about the ring”. (London, *The Game*, 1905, p. 40)

London portrays Fleming as a figure of unwavering determination. Despite exhaustion and physical collapse, Joe continues to fight, preserving his dignity even as his body fails: „His most patient toil and wildest effort, all the strain and the stress of his being-to the Game, his heart's desire”. (London, *The Game*, 1905, p. 43)

His decision is not motivated by financial gain or stubborn pride but by loyalty to his own code of honor. Through Fleming, London presents heroism as perseverance rather than conquest.

The ring thus becomes a symbolic space in which moral identity is tested. Although Joe Fleming dies as a result of the fight, his refusal to abandon the struggle transforms physical defeat into ethical victory. London's narrative implies that withdrawal would constitute a greater loss than death itself, as it would signify a surrender of personal integrity.

Man and Nature: Survival and Illusion in *To Build a Fire*

In contrast to *The Game*, *To Build a Fire* depicts a solitary, unnamed man confronting the overwhelming power of nature. London's choice to withhold the protagonist's name universalizes the character, presenting him as a representative of humanity rather than a unique individual. The Yukon wilderness functions as an impersonal and merciless force, indifferent to human ambition or intelligence.

„The man went steadily ahead”; „Once in a while the thought repeated itself that it was very cold”; „But it did not matter much, he decided. What was a little frost? A bit painful, that was all. It was never serious”. (London, *To Build a Fire*, 1908, p. 67). Initially, the protagonist exhibits strong self-confidence, believing that his practical knowledge and experience will ensure survival. This confidence, however, proves illusory.

As the cold intensifies and his physical control deteriorates, the man's rational calculations fail. The fire he attempts to build becomes a symbol of hope and life, yet its extinction marks the collapse of human agency before natural determinism. He treated the flame carefully. It meant life, and it must not cease. The blood had left the surface of his body and he now began to shake from the cold. A large piece of a wet plant fell on the little fire. He tried to push it out with his fingers. His shaking body made him push it too far and he scattered the little fire over a wide space”. (London, *To Build a Fire*, 1908, p. 75)

Unlike Joe Fleming, who knowingly confronts death, the protagonist of *To Build a Fire* only gradually recognizes the inevitability of his fate. Nevertheless, his final decision to meet death calmly reflects a form of

moral awakening. In accepting death with composure, he achieves a measure of dignity that contrasts sharply with his earlier overconfidence: „He was losing his battle with the frost. It was moving into his body from all sides. This thought drove him forward. But he ran no more than 100 feet, when he fell head first”; „It was his last moment of fear. When he had recovered his breath and his control, he sat and thought about meeting death with dignity”; „Freezing was not as bad as people thought. There were many worse ways to die”. (London, *To Build a Fire*, 1908, p. 78)

Dignified Defeat and Moral Victory

Although the protagonists of *The Game* and *To Build a Fire* face different adversaries—one human, the other natural—their experiences converge thematically. Both characters are defeated physically, yet neither relinquishes the struggle entirely. London thus distinguishes between destruction and defeat, emphasizing that moral resilience can coexist with physical annihilation.

Joe Fleming's final moments reinforce this idea: „Joe had at last become the whirlwind” (London, *The Game*, 1905, p. 39); „Fighting to the last, striving to get at his antagonist, he surged and was driven about the ring”; „He went over backward Genevieve saw his muscles relax while he was yet in the air, and she heard the thud of his head on the canvas”. (London, *The Game*, 1905, p. 40)

This conception aligns London with later literary figures such as Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway’s assertion that “a man can be destroyed but not defeated” echoes London’s portrayal of dignified resistance. Joe Fleming’s unwavering commitment and the unnamed man’s final acceptance of death both exemplify this principle, suggesting that heroism resides in steadfastness rather than survival.

CONCLUSION

Jack London’s *The Game* and *To Build a Fire* present a world governed by powerful natural and fatal forces, yet they simultaneously affirm the possibility of human dignity within that world. London rejects simplistic notions of victory and success, proposing instead that the true measure of humanity lies in the courage to resist, even when resistance is futile.

By redefining heroism as dignified struggle, London situates his protagonists within the broader tradition of American naturalism while also anticipating existentialist thought. In confronting the ring or the frozen wilderness, London’s characters reveal that meaning emerges not from triumph, but from the resolve to fight when no victory is possible.

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