

Split-Page Notes: "To Build a Fire"

Questions	Notes
<p>1. The narrator describes the man as a <i>chechaquo</i>, or newcomer? What evidence supports this characterization?</p> <p>2. What happens to the man's spit? What decision does he make when this happens, and what does it reveal about him?</p> <p>3. What does the dog know that the man doesn't seem to understand? What words or phrases reveal the dog's understanding? What is the difference between the way the man responds to his situation and the way the dog responds? Why do they have different responses?</p>	<p>The man is described as a <i>chechaquo</i>, or newcomer, because the lack of sun and the fact that no one else is traveling has made no impression on the man. In addition, although he is aware that it is cold, he does not understand that the frigid temperatures are even colder and more severe than suggested by the actual temperature reading. The text states, "Fifty degrees below zero meant eighty-odd degrees of frost." The man does not appear to be aware of the danger that such conditions can create for humans; otherwise, he would not be on the trail.</p> <p>The man's spit crackles and freezes in the air, before it even hits the ground. When the man sees his spit freeze in the air, he realizes that the temperature was below even 50 degrees below zero, but he does not know how much colder. He does not seem fazed by this, and continues onward toward the camp. The text states, "He plunged in among the spruce trees," which suggests the man is continuing on with his journey despite the harsh, dangerous conditions. This shows he is either ignorant/unaware or arrogant about his ability to survive in the harsh conditions.</p> <p>The man was surprised at the cold, and the extent to which it had quickly frozen his face and extremities. This suggests that the man is not totally unaware and ignorant, but is making the conscious decisions to continue on his journey despite the cold, even though this is not a wise decision.</p> <p>Unlike the man, the dog appears to have concerns about continuing to travel in the cold temperature. The dog is described as lagging behind the man, which suggests he is not eager to continue. The text states the animal "was depressed by the tremendous cold. It knew that it was no time for traveling." The dog also has an apprehension, and slinks along at the man's heels, questioning his decisions. The dog is characterized as having instincts that tell him that they should not continue, despite lacking the information the man has about the actual temperature.</p>

Summary

Read the following quotation from paragraph 3.

But all this--the mysterious, far-reaching hairline trail, the absence of sun from the sky, the tremendous cold, and the strangeness and weirdness of it all--made no impression on the man. It was not because he was long used to it. He was a newcomer in the land, a chechaquo, and this was his first winter. 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.

The author spends the first two paragraphs describing the setting in detail, and then in paragraph 3, he indicates that the setting makes no impression on the main character. Why might the author choose to describe the man in this way? How is this different from the dog?

In the beginning of "To Build a Fire," a man and his dog set out in frigid temperatures to make their way toward a camp in the snowy, frost covered north. The temperature is well below 50 degrees fahrenheit, and all signs suggest that the man and the dog are putting their lives in danger by continuing to press forward in such harsh conditions. The sun has not shone for days, there is a gray, desolate feeling in the air, the weather is so cold that the man's spit freezes and crackles the moment it leaves his mouth.

The author describes the man as being a newcomer or novice. This is his first winter. Unlike the dog, who senses that this is not a safe time to travel, the man seems oblivious to the warnings and presses on, allowing his arrogance to continue to fuel his decisions to keep traveling. The author says the man has no imagination. He says the man notices things around him, but he can't understand what those things might mean or their importance. This seems like a dangerous warning, like the man is going to do something really stupid in this story.

Questions	Notes
4. What does the man make the dog do in paragraph 12? What is the dog's reaction, and what does this suggest about the dog?	The man makes the dog cross the frozen areas ahead of him, so that he will be able to tell if the ice is fully solid to ensure he will not fall in. The dog is hesitant to do so, because he understands the danger and also has instincts about the extent to which it is safe to cross. This suggests that the dog's instincts are valuable to the man, and perhaps even more valuable given the man's decision-making is ignorant of the conditions around him.
5. Why is the man unable to eat his lunch? What does this reveal about him?	The man is unable to eat his lunch because his hands and beard/area around his face are too frozen for him to be able to eat. The man has forgotten to build a fire and thaw out from the cold. This demonstrates his novice nature, and his ignorance of what it takes to survive in the wild.
6. What happens to the man at the end of paragraph 17? Why is this problematic?	The man falls into water that covers him up past his boots, causing his feet to become soaked.

Summary Question

Read this excerpt from paragraph 16.

“This man did not know cold. Possibly all the generations of his ancestry had been ignorant of cold, of real cold, of cold one hundred and seven degrees below freezing-point. But the dog knew; all its ancestry knew, and it had inherited the knowledge. And it knew that it was not good to walk abroad in such fearful cold. It was the time to lie snug in a hole in the snow and wait for a curtain of cloud to be drawn across the face of outer space whence this cold came. 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 toward the fire.”

What does this quotation reveal about the man and his dog and their relationship? To what does the narrator attribute the differences in each character? Be sure to cite other textual evidence to support your response.

This quotation reveals that the man is living by reason (although, not very good reasoning) and the dog is living based on instinct. In this situation, the man is completely ignorant about what to do, while the dog has inherited his knowledge from his ancestors. Thus, the dog is instinctively prepared to survive the cold, while the man is not. So, for example, as the man decides to walk on, the dog droops his tail in disappointment. When the man decides to move on from his fire, the dog is again disappointed and yearns back toward the fire. Since the man hasn't treated the dog well before, the dog doesn't communicate his sense of danger to the man. Instead, the dog follows the man as ordered.

Questions	Notes
<p>7. In paragraph 21, what reflections does the man have? What does these reveal about the man? What realizations does he have that build his awareness of the cold?</p>	<p>In paragraph 21, the man successfully builds a fire, and he reflects that the old timer who gave him advice was wrong. The text states, “He remembered the advice of the old-timer on Sulphur Creek, and smiled. The old-timer had been very serious in laying down the law that no man must travel alone in the Klondike after fifty below. Well, here he was; he had had the accident; he was alone; and he had saved himself. 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.” This shows that the man is full of himself and believes that he - as a novice - knows more than more experienced travelers. Despite this, the man feels surprised at how rapidly his nose and cheeks have frozen, and how quickly his hands have gone lifeless from the cold.</p>
<p>8. What happens to the fire in paragraph 23? Why?</p>	<p>Snow from the tree above the fire falls from the tree and extinguishes the flames. This happens because in the man’s haste to build a fire and dry his feet, he did not think about the danger of building the fire under the tree and as such did not take proactive measures to create the fire out in the open where it would not have become extinguished.</p>
<p>9. What happens as the man tries to light the fire a second time?</p>	<p>The man’s fingers and hands are so frozen that he is unable to properly build the arrangement of sticks for the fire or light single matches. Instead, the man has to strike all of the matches in order to get them ablaze, and he has lost so much feeling that he does not realize when his hand is being burned. The man is able to light the birch wood, but the flame becomes extinguished because he is unable to move the moss and debris and set up the sticks properly. The fire failed, and he is out of matches.</p>
<p>Summary</p>	
<p>The man successfully builds a fire after wetting his feet, and feels proud of his accomplishment. So proud, in fact, that he reflects on the advice of the old timer and thinks that any man can survive the cold if he is “man” enough to keep his wits about him. As the man pats himself on the back, snow falls from the bough above the fire and extinguishes the flame. The man suddenly begins to panic, as he realizes he must build another fire if he is to warm his frozen feet and extremities. The tone and mood shift from congratulatory to panic as the man realizes he faces death. The man tries to build the fire, his frozen fingers create problems. They are too frozen for him to successfully build a proper fire, and he is forced to light all of his matches in order to get a blaze started. Despite lighting the birch wood, the man’s fire goes out because of his inability to get the twigs and kindling in order. He is left frozen, without fire, and has no matches left.</p>	

Summary Question

Possible themes from “To Build a Fire”:

- Theme: Human pride can lead to our downfall
 - This theme is built through the arrogance of the man and the fact that he ignores warning signs around him which lead to his death.
 - The man in “To Build a Fire” has great pride in his abilities. He is arrogant that he is able to survive on his own. He calls the old-timers “womanish” and confidently proclaims that he had an accident (sinking through the ice) and managed to survive without a trailmate.
 - The man ignores all warning signs around him that convey the severe danger of his surroundings. The narrator describes the man as not understanding the importance of his surroundings. The old-timer tells him he shouldn’t travel alone, but the man refuses to follow the advice. The man stupidly builds a fire under a tree, which leads to the fire being put out by falling snow. When the man runs out of matches, he also runs out of options, and he ultimately freezes to death.
 - This demonstrates that human pride can be dangerous and lead to a person’s downfall or death.
- Theme: We can judge a person’s character by the way in which they treat their animals
 - This theme is built through the relationship of the man and his dog.
 - The dog in “To Build a Fire” has good instincts, which the man ignores. When the dog is hesitant to continue on the journey, the man ignores that warning and continues on.
 - Also, the man does not treat his dog with a great deal of respect. The dog acts fearful of the man and the text says the man never caresses the dog except with a whip. The man views the dog as a means to an end. For example, he makes the dog cross the ice to warn the man of danger (even though the dog seems unwilling) and then, when he the man is trying to survive, he considers killing the dog to keep his hand warm in the dog’s carcass. In the end, the dog leaves his dead owner and heads to the camp where other men are who might treat him better.
- Theme: Animal instinct is better for survival than man’s reason
 - This theme is built through the man’s arrogance and the dog’s reaction to the man’s decisions.
 - The man in “To Build a Fire” has great pride in his abilities. He is arrogant that he is able to survive on his own. He calls the old-timers “womanish” and confidently proclaims that he had an accident (sinking through the ice) and managed to survive without a trailmate. The man has information that the dog does not—he knows the temperature in the number of degrees, he has the skills to build a fire, etc. However, the man’s lack of instinct or willingness to pay attention to his surroundings make his reasoning skills less helpful than the dog’s instinct.
 - The dog reacts negatively to the man’s decisions because he realizes the man is making poor choices. When the man wants the dog to test the ice, the dog is hesitant to cross. When the man continues on his journey despite the warning signs, the dog continues with his tail “drooping discouragement.” In the end, the dog lives because he is able to survive in the cold and knows how to get to camp where there is fire and food. The man dies because he lacks the instinct and adaptation skills that the dog has.