



# An Analysis on the Protagonist's Tragedy from Man-Place Relation in *To Build a Fire*

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**Abstract:** As one of Jack London's famous northern frontier novels, *To Build a Fire* is a story about an unnamed protagonist called "the man" who, in his adventure to cross the polar Yukon River Territory, freezes to death finally. Most studies about it analyzed the power of nature demonstrated in this story. However, in this confrontation between man and nature, there are no studies about the protagonist's tragic ending, which plays an important role in dealing with the relation between man and nature. In this paper, in conjunction with Yi-Fu Tuan's theory of man-place relation, the reason of the protagonist's tragedy is explored from two aspects. One is the desire of the protagonist to escape away from the old place and leave for the new place, the other is the disharmonious relation between the protagonist and the new place. In the process of analyzing, the relationship among the protagonist, the old place (America) and the new place (Yukon River Territory) is revealed, which enlightens human that only the harmonious relation between man and place can achieve the long-term development of man and nature<sup>[1]</sup>.

**Keywords:** *To Build a Fire*; the protagonist's tragedy; man-place relation

## 1. Brief Introduction to Jack London and *To Build a Fire*

Jack London was the father of American proletarian literature and a famous realist writer who had written nineteen novels and more than one hundred and fifty short stories and tales in his lifetime. His major works included *Son of the Wolf*, *The Call of the Wild*, *Love of Life*, *Sea Wolf*, and *Martin Eden* and so on. Jack London expanded the subjects of novels, wrote fresh northern stories and southern stories, and depicted the peculiar relationship between human and animals<sup>[4]</sup>. What's more, the novels created by him reflected the social contradictions in America in the early twentieth century, which profoundly revealed the social ugliness of capitalism, gave people great enlightenment, and promoted the development of American literature. All these literary honors were inseparable from Jack London's rich experiences, like his childhood working experiences, the journey to be a sailor and the adventure to Yukon River and the like.

As one of Jack London's famous northern frontier novels, *To Build a Fire* was set in the Yukon River Territory, one of Canada's ten provinces and three territories. It was located in the northwest of the country, covered an area of about 850,000 square kilometers and about one-tenth of it lied within the Arctic Circle. The story began by showing us the harsh conditions of the northland. For example, "Day had broken cold and gray, exceedingly cold and gray." "It was a clear day, and yet there seemed an intangible pall over the things of things, a subtle gloom that made the day dark." What's more, the temperature here was as low as fifty degrees below zero, even down to minus seventy-five degrees. In this condition, the protagonist, a novice, disobeyed others' advice and took a dog with him as he prepared to cross the icy wilderness to meet his companions at camp. During his journey, he swung along the creek-bed carefully, but still inadvertently wetted his legs. He had no choice but to build a fire to warm and dry his shoes and socks. However, the fire was extinguished by the snow because of his inexperience that the fire could not be built under trees. Desperately, he hoped to kill the dog and warm his own hands in its body, but he was so stiff that he could not kill it. Realizing this brutal reality, he began to run as hard as he could and imagined that he would arrive at the camp with running, but his body grew numb and he never got up until the end of his life after falling a second time. Only the dog survived alone, running in the direction of the camp that it knew would provide it with food and warmth.

## 2. Tragedy Analysis

*To Build a Fire* is a story about a man entered the polar region of Yukon with great expectation and fearlessness, but he was frozen to death at last. Most studies about this story analyze the great power of nature, like Liu Xiangfei, Zhao Fanghua and Sun Jing. In fact, the protagonist's tragic ending is also worthy of consideration, which can be the enlightenment for man to handle the relation between man and nature better.

This paper bases on the theory of Yi-Fu Tuan who is the founder of humanistic geography and an expert in the field of man-place relation. He points out that place is the center of meaning constructed by experience, and local knowledge must be acquired through the experiential world of people living in this place<sup>[1]</sup>. It is through the grasp of local

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knowledge that one can achieve a deep knowledge and understanding of a certain place. Besides, because of the wandering mind of human, they always tend to mobile to new places. In this story, the protagonist is quite eager to escape from America (the old place) because of his desire to conquer the wilderness and the enormous problems existed in American society, while Yukon River Territory (the new place), a place full of adventures, wilderness, freedom and wealth, just fulfills him. He is urgent to leave for Yukon River Territory. However, he is a total outsider for this place and doesn't master the local knowledge of this extreme place. As a result, he can't deal with the relation among himself, America and Yukon River Territory, which is the crucial point that leads to his tragedy.

Therefore, in this paper, based on the theory of Yi-Fu Tuan, the reason of the protagonist's tragedy is explored from the following two aspects. One is the desire of the protagonist to escape from the old place and leave for the new place, the other is the disharmonious relation between the protagonist and the new place. It is the process of analyzing the reason of the protagonist's tragedy that can draw the attention of human to the importance of the harmonious relationship between man and place.

### **2.1 The desire to escape from old place and leave for new place**

Frankly speaking, the protagonist was not totally doomed to his tragic ending and he had the opportunity to avoid it, like waiting for much warmer time, or setting out with more partners. Why was he so impatient? The reason was that he can't stand the old place and desire to leave for the new place.

First of all, influenced by the personality hidden in American national culture, the protagonist was eager to flee the civilized America and to conquer the wilderness, which was doomed to fail<sup>[5]</sup>. The United States had started a frontier movement since the War of Independence, such as the Westward Movement. In order to push the frontiers of civilization into the wilderness, Americans kept expanding, pioneering, conquering and possessing. It was also the Americans continuous conquering that the territory of America expanded at a high rate of speed. This spirit of adventure and the desire to conquer that arose in the process of frontier expansion were rooted in the hearts of Americans, which not only showed the American attitude towards the wilderness, but also became an important part of the American national personality. The protagonist was also deeply influenced by this kind of national character and his attitude towards Yukon River Territory was to conquer it. However, nature was more powerful than man could imagine and man could not succeed, which was fully demonstrated by the tragedy of the protagonist in this story<sup>[2]</sup>.

Furthermore, the protagonist expected to escape from the chaos and turmoil of American society, and release themselves through leaving for Yukon River Territory where was full of freedom and adventures. *To Build a Fire* was published in 1907. At that time, the frontier was closed, pioneering had ended and the territory of America had been established. At the same time, America was undergoing the second Industrial Revolution. The rapid development of industrialization made great progress for America in all kinds of business. But there were also lots of problems occurred and increased gradually with the rapid development, such as the growing gap between the rich and the poor, the corruption of the political system and the deterioration of social morality and so on. Faced with various political, economic and social problems, Americans attributed their root cause to the disappearance of the "free" land, forming frontier anxiety<sup>[6]</sup>. This anxiety included both the worry about the "frontier closure" and the fear of the loss of the national uniqueness formed by the American nation in the pioneering era. In the face of such anxiety, the Northern Frontier, which was well known to American readers in London's works, seemed to be a zone of emotional projection for them. The sparsely populated Northern Frontier, full of desolation, freedom, cold and challenges, provided an imaginative space for Americans in frontier anxiety to relieve social pressure and seek spiritual release. As a result, many Americans expected to escape from the chaotic America and leave for Northern Frontier, just like the protagonist in *To Build a Fire*.

In addition, the protagonist was longing to leave for the Yukon River Territory because of the desire for wealth. With the rapid development of economy in America, the rich became wealthier and wealthier, while the poor became worse and worse. Both of them were all desperate to gain more money to survive better in this kind of society. As it happened, in 1897, the discovery of gold in the Klondike region of the Yukon River basin was widely publicized by the American press, resulting in the second gold rush in American history, thus a large number of Americans flocked to the Yukon for the sake of wealth<sup>[4]</sup>. Along with the gold rush, many business opportunities also emerged with its supporting business. For example, the famous jeans brand, Levi's Jeans, found business opportunities from the gold rush and began to make reliable work clothes for the gold seekers from sturdy denim and canvas. The protagonist in the story was eager for the wealth and was bound for the old claim on the left fork of Henderson Greek, 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 possibility of getting out logs in the spring from the island in the Yukon. Driven by the strong desire to gain wealth, he set out to venture in this wilderness. Although the Yukon Territory was much colder than America, even than everywhere the protagonist had experienced ever before, it did not matter if he could gain wealth.

In short, the protagonist expected to flee the civilized America to conquer the powerful wilderness at first, which was hidden in his American culture. Secondly, because enormous social, political and economic problems increased in America, the protagonist could not wait to escape from America, regain the freedom that his ancestors had once. Thirdly, the protagonist wanted to acquire wealth to survive better. The above three points pushed the protagonist to leave America. At the same time, the Yukon River Territory was a place full of adventures, wilderness and freedom, as well as a place could help the protagonist acquire wealth, which was a pull for him to leave for the Yukon River

Territory. The push from America and the pull from the Yukon River Territory urged the protagonist to act quickly as he can. This kind of desire made him forget all the dangers, and also led to his final tragedy.

## **2.2 Disharmonious relation between the protagonist and the new place**

The relationship between man and place is mutual restriction and interdependence. The place provides man with survival condition, while the activities of man also influence the place. Only when this kind of relationship develops harmoniously, can man and place achieve unity and make progress in the long run. However, for the protagonist in this story, he reached Yukon River Territory as an outsider and didn't handle local knowledge of this place. As it were, the relation between the protagonist and the Yukon River Territory was disharmonious, which doomed to his tragedy.

When it came to this polar territory, Yukon River Territory, the first thing that struck us was the extreme cold weather, because summers were short, winters were long for most of the year, and the river froze over for years to form glaciers. At the beginning of *To Build a Fire*, it was also mentioned that "Day had broken cold and gray, exceedingly cold and gray." and "There was no sun nor hint of sun, though there was not a cloud in the sky. It was a clear day, and yet there seemed an intangible pall over the face of things, a subtle gloom that made the day dark." Besides, "The Yukon lay a mile wide and hidden less than three feet of ice. On top of this ice were as many feet of snow. It was all pure white." Furthermore, the second impression the Yukon left on us was the vastness of the territory. The story showed us that compared to the Yukon Territory, the broadest main road was a dark hair-line that curved and twisted from around the spruce-covered island in the south, and that curved and twisted away into the north. The trail led south five hundred miles to the Chilcoot Pass, Dyea, and salt water; and it led north seventy miles to Dawson, and still on to the north a thousand miles to Nulato, and finally to St. Michael on Bering Sea, a thousand miles and half a thousand more.

For the natives of Yukon River Territory, they have spent plenty of time adapting the place they live, so they are extremely familiar with the place, like the weather, terrain, and condition of land and so on. Yi-Fu Tuan points out that the native, by contrast, has a complex attitude derived from his immersion in the totality of his moment and the place can be expressed by the natives only with difficulty and through behavior, local tradition, lore and myth indirectly<sup>[1]</sup>. For example, the old man from Sulphur Bay who was a native of the Yukon Territory, gave several pieces of advice to the protagonist before he entered the Yukon Territory. These advice not only demonstrated the old man's attitude to the Yukon, but also indicated the tragic ending of the protagonist who adventured to enter the polar Yukon Territory. For example, "no man must travel alone in the Klondike after fifty below," "after fifty below, a man should travel with a partner," and "when it is seventy-five below zero, a man must not fail in his first attempt to build a fire, that is, if his feet are wet." and so on. Aside from that, the native dog that accompanied the protagonist also revealed its familiarity with the place. Although it had no concept of temperature and no clear understanding of the bitter cold, its instincts and intuition about the place told it that today's outing hid a vague threat and that such cold weather was not suitable for walking around outside. It also knew the terrain so well that when the protagonist died, it turned and trotted up the trail in the direction of the camp it knew, where were the other food-providers and fire-providers.

What's more, the natives had developed themselves according to the local conditions in order to better adapt the Yukon Territory. For instance, the dog that set out with the protagonist was not as common as others, but a big native husky, the proper wolf-dog, gray-coated without any visible or temperamental difference from its brother, the wild wolf, which could protect it from the freezing cold in Yukon River Territory. Besides, it had handled the necessary survival skills to deal with the emergency in this kind of place. For example, when the dog got its legs wet in the glacier, "it made quick efforts to lick the ice off its legs, then dropped down in the snow and began to bite out the ice that had formed between the toes."

However, for outsiders, they are newcomers for the place and they are not equipped with the perception that the natives possess. They don't know the temperature, the terrain, and the necessary skills to survival in this place and so on. Everything in this place is unfamiliar to them and they have to perceive the place by themselves. For the way of perceiving, people usually rely on their five senses to feel the place when entering an unknown place, including vision, hearing, smell, taste and touch, among which vision is the main way. Yi-Fu Tuan also points out that, "Generally speaking, we may say that only the outsider has a viewpoint; his perception is often a matter of using his eyes to compose pictures<sup>[1]</sup>." However, this kind of perception of the place, communicated directly by the physical senses, is external, superficial, and simple. Therefore, when the protagonist who was a novice entered the harsher polar territory, he had no choice but to depend on his senses perception at first which was far from enough. He was likely to be unaware of the dangers lurked in this polar territory, and put himself at a disadvantage.

Besides, the outsiders don't possess the experience that the natives acquire from the place. Generally speaking, the place will reflect man's perception and attitude towards the land<sup>[3]</sup>. In *To Build a Fire*, there was no one lived in the wilderness of Yukon River Territory. The furrow of the old sled-trail was plainly visible, but a dozen inches of snow covered the marks of the last runners, which meant it had been a long time since anyone entered this area because of the extremely cold. While the protagonist didn't handle this kind of experience, he still decided to set out just with cookies, cigarettes, gloves, a warm suit of clothes, and a dog. Besides, he didn't ponder that how important a companion would be in the polar place. When he saw that the day had turned into night because of the absence of the sun, he thought it was a common thing because he had not seen the sun for several days. He considered fifty degrees below zero meant eighty-odd degrees of frost, which was just different in numbers. Such fact impressed him as being cold and uncomfortable, and that was all. When he saw the spit burst open in mid-air, he knew the temperature was

below minus fifty, but he didn't know how low the temperature really was. As his pace progressed, he was satisfied with his speed and happily thought he would reach camp by 6:00 p.m. at four miles an hour quarters. However, he didn't meditate upon his frailty as a creature of temperature, and upon man's frailty in general, able only to live within certain narrow limits of heat and cold. His hands and face soon lost consciousness due to the cold, and then when his feet were wet, he keenly aware of his danger. He wanted to warm himself to build a fire but failed because of the false location he chose, and there was no one to help him to build another fire. Until the end, a certain fear of death, dull and oppressive, came to him when he looked down to find his hands and realized they were only hanging from his arms and he could only find where they were with his eyes. As it were, it was so late for him that he realized the power of Yukon at the last moment of his life.

The old man and the native dog, which had lived in the Yukon River Territory for a long time, had developed a harmonious relation with the place and were familiar with it. Furthermore, they had developed themselves in order to better adapt the place. Their hearts were filled with familiarity, awe, fear and worry about the bitter cold and the vastness of the territory. However, for the protagonist, when he chose to enter and challenge this territory as an outsider, he could only rely on himself. He didn't acquire the perception and experience that the natives obtained from the place after being together for a long time. He also did not realize that he was pushing the limits of the temperature at which humans could live as constant temperature animals, and he was unable to properly deal with the various dangers and emergencies along the way. As a result, the ending of the natives and the outsider was totally different, i.e. the protagonist was frozen to death, while the dog lived.

### 3. Conclusion

*To Build a Fire*, one of Northern Frontier novels by Jack London, is a short story about an unnamed protagonist called "the man" who, in his adventure to cross the polar Yukon River Territory, freezes to death finally. The relation between man and nature demonstrated in this story is always the focus of studies. What's more, most studies concern the great power of nature, but neglect the failure of man. As a matter of fact, the analysis of the man's tragic ending also contributes to handling the relation of man and nature.

In this paper, the reason of the protagonist's tragedy is analyzed based on the theory of Yi-Fu Tuan from two aspects. The first is the protagonist's desire to escape away from the old place and leave for the new place. On the one hand, the old place is a kind of push. The protagonist, influenced by the personality hidden in American culture, is longing to flee the civilized America and to conquer the wilderness of Yukon River Territory. What's more, because lots of social problems increased in America, the protagonist is eager to escape from the chaotic and terrible America, regains the freedom his ancestors had once, and acquire wealth. On the other hand, the new place is a kind of pull. The protagonist expects to leave for the Yukon River Territory which is a place full of adventures, wilderness and freedom, as well as a place can help the protagonist acquire wealth. The push from America and the pull from Yukon River Territory make the protagonist's desire so intense and urge him to act as quick as possible. The second is the disharmonious relation between the protagonist and the new place. Because the protagonist is an outsider for the new place, he doesn't possess the perception and experience that the natives acquire from the place after being together for a long time. That is to say, he can't comprehend what the information about the Yukon River Territory means, and can't deal with the unknown dangers lurked in this polar region. As a result, it is the desire to escape away from the old place and leave for the new place, and the disharmonious relation between the protagonist and the new place that leads to the tragedy of the protagonist in this confrontation between man and nature.

Through the analysis of the protagonist's tragedy in this paper, the fact can be shown. That is to say, although the power of nature is greater than man can imagine, man can take efforts to harmonize the relation between man and nature, and one of the ways is to achieve the harmony of man and place. Aside from that, some limitations also exist in this paper. For example, there are no studies to analyze *To Build a Fire* from the perspective of man-place relation, which can not only be an innovation but also be a great difficulty for this paper. Besides, the theory of man-place relation is in constant development, while the study of the author is far from enough. There is a large room for development in this paper.

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