Jack London
"To Build a Fire"

I. Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Explore the strengths and weaknesses of American individualism and independence by considering Jack London's "To Build a Fire" in relation to the principles enunciated in the Declaration of Independence;
- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it
- Cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text
- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development
- Summarize the key supporting details and ideas
- Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text
- Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone
- Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning and the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence
- Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Common Core State Standards, History/Social Studies

RH.9-10.2, RH.9-10.3, RH.9-10.8, RH.11-12.1, RH.11-12.2, RH.11-12.4, RH.11-12.9

Common Core State Standards, English Language Arts

RL.9-10.1, RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.3, RL.11-12.1, RL.11-12.3

II. About the Author

Jack London, like the unnamed man in this story, lived on the edge. Born in 1876, he died a short forty years later. As a young man, he was a full-fledged participant in the Yukon Gold Rush of 1897. Like many others at the time, London made the incredibly arduous journey by foot and handcrafted boat from Dyea in Alaska over Chilkoot Pass—a three-quarter-mile 45-degree-angled obstacle course—and eventually down the Yukon River into the Northwest Territories. The only gold he brought back, however, was an experience that he would mine for gems of literature for much of his writing life, as evidenced in his well-known novels like *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*, as well as in "To Build a Fire" (1908), all of which draw on the places he saw and the people he met during those hope-filled and brutal times in the Northwestern Yukon territory.

III. Summary

The story is set in the depth of winter in the Northwest Territories, a place profoundly inhospitable to human beings. The plot is straightforward: On a single, sunless day, an unnamed man undertakes a nine-hour walk along a faint and little-traveled trail in brutally cold weather—75 degrees below zero, 107 degrees of frost. Bound for the mining camp, where his companions are waiting, he takes a roundabout way so that he can scope out the "possibilities of getting out logs in the spring from the islands in the Yukon" (2). Save for the clothes he wears, a watch, his lunch, some chewing tobacco, some matches, and a few pieces of birch bark, he takes precious little with him. He is, however, accompanied by a husky, who seems far more impressed and depressed by—and instinctively aware of—the "tremendous cold" (3). He starts his trek at 9:00 a.m., pauses at 10:00, arrives at his lunch destination at 12:30 p.m.—exactly the time he had set for himself—builds a fire, eats, takes a leisurely smoke, and resumes walking, aiming to make camp by 6:00 p.m. But suddenly, "it happened" (7): he accidentally steps into an icy spring. To dry off, he successfully builds another fire, but he does so under a "fully freighted" tree, whose boughs soon capsize their loads of snow and snuff the fire out (9). Despite the frost that has already affected his fingers, he valiantly attempts to build a third fire, but, alas, he fails. He then makes a couple of attempts to run before deciding to meet death "decently," "with dignity" (14). He sits down and slips into a frozen sleep,

watched over by the increasingly bewildered dog, who eventually wanders off and presumably makes his way back to camp.

IV. Thinking about the Text

Citizens from many nations, for quite different reasons, sought to penetrate the Northwest Territories. We can imagine, for example, a story like London's about a French Jesuit priest losing his life while trudging through the Northern winter for the purpose of baptizing a newborn Huron Indian. We would be invited by such a tale to admire or even be inspired by the deep piety, the sacrificial spirituality, of such a Frenchman. We also have an historical British example in Sir John Franklin, who set out in 1845 with 129 men and two amply stocked ships to find the Northwest Passage, a route through the Arctic from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. Although his expedition failed and all aboard were lost, Franklin stood for many decades as a proud symbol of British naval prowess and national, even imperial, honor. Noble impulses, like piety and honor, still inspire. But Jack London's anonymous adventurer is out on the Yukon River, all alone in the dead of winter, searching for a profitable business opportunity: Jack London's man is clearly an American. So are the story's larger themes. But before getting to them, we need to look carefully at the protagonist of the story: his character, his deeds, and his purposes. We will also want to decide what we think of him.

A. The Man

1. How would you characterize London's protagonist, "the man"? What do you know about him (1–2)?

IN CONVERSATION

In this conversation, Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass discuss London's story with William Schambra, director of the Hudson Institute's Bradley Center for Philanthropy and Civic Renewal.

Leon Kass: I would say that the man is certainly independent. He hears advice from the old-timer at Sulphur Creek, but he relies basically on his own judgment, on his own capacity. He is not only independent, but he is self-reliant. He is competent. Even though he is a newcomer to the territory, he is very observant.

He's a keen observer and knows the things around him. When the going gets tough, though he might panic for a moment, he's able to beat down that panic with efforts of self-command. He's practical and enduring. And not to be omitted is that which relates to the title of the story: he knows how to build a fire.

Amy Kass: He also knows that is what stands between life and death, even though we're told "he has no imagination." He knows that.

William Schambra: He has no imagination, and indeed, he seems to be out in the wilderness for the least imaginative of reasons, which is to scope out an island in the Yukon for logs that might be floated down in the spring flood. What's that all about? Is that an American characteristic?

Leon Kass: This shows that he's enterprising, that he's looking for ways to turn the things that are about him—in this case, certain natural things—into things which are useful and profitable.

There are complexities to the character and maybe limitations. He's out there, absolutely alone, in an inhospitable place, without fear; he is self-reliant, confident that he can master what has to be done, and he tries to do it on his own. I'm not sure that the fact that he fails means that we should simply think the less of him for these particular admirable qualities—qualities which it seems to me are also encouraged by American principles, the American way of life.

For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.

2. Compare the man and the dog (3). How do they differ?
3. Look at pages 7–9. The man knows how to build a fire. What does this tell us about him?
4. The narrator says: "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" (2). What does this mean? Is it inevitably a problem?

IN CONVERSATION

Amy Kass: We're told specifically that he has no imagination about the meanings or significance of things, which means he doesn't really understand that one could die from doing what he's doing.

If we turn to the ancient Greeks, we learn that this man is in possession of both of the gifts that Prometheus gives to human beings: fire, which is the beginning of all the arts and sciences, and blind hope. Prometheus gave human beings blind hope to keep them from always seeing death before their eyes. Hope allows them to go on, to be optimistic. And this is a man that shows us that.

Leon Kass: But, is having a lively imagination overrated? Aren't we better off being nose-to-the-ground, practical-minded people who attend to the here and now, and go about our own business, and let destiny take care of itself?

William Schambra: The story occurs on a day without clouds, and as night draws on there is nothing but these sparkling stars that seem to be so close to Earth. There is nothing between this spot on Earth and the cosmos. And you need *something*; you need to draw something over that, to protect yourself from that. The dog understands this: in this cold weather, you either snuggle under the snow or wait until a cloud cover comes. You need a horizon to protect yourself from the cold and indifferent cosmos. So you need imagination.

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5. Is this man recognizably American? Typically American? Why or why not?
6. What is the significance of the fact that the man is not named?

IN CONVERSATION

William Schambra: It's an odd circumstance. Even his friend Bud, who advised him on the one piece of equipment he regrets *not* having (a nose guard that would

have protected his cheek) is named. And "Bud" goes back to this sort of fraternal gathering described earlier by London. The man is a type of human being. To give him a name would be to pin him down.

Amy Kass: I think the fact that he's constantly the no-name man, "the man," suggests that he's nobody—and his death palpably shows us that. He's not buried by anybody. He freezes to death by himself. But on the other hand, he is every American. He's got all of the quintessential virtues and vices that are American.

Leon Kass: Let me embrace both of those and add a third thing, which cuts in a slightly different direction. This man is not governed by the desire to make a name for himself. In other words, he's not moved by honor. He's moved by gain.

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B. The Man's Surroundings

1. Characterize the man's surroundings (see 1–2). Where is the story set? What is the scenery like?
2. Consider the images London uses to set the scene—for example, "the spittle crackled . . . in the air" (2); the "muzzle of ice held his lips so rigidly that he was unable to clear his chin when he expelled the [tobacco] juice" (3); "the cold of space smote the unprotected tip of the planet, and he, being on the unprotected tip, received the full force of the blow" (8). What kind of moods and feelings do these images create?
3. What attitude toward nature does the man display? Compare the man's attitude in the first few pages of the story to his final moments.
4. What attitude toward nature do you, as reader, experience while reading this story?

C. The Man's Motives and Purposes

1. Use evidence from the text to determine what motivates the man to act as he does. What drives him? Why is he out on such a cold day?
2. How do you explain the man's seeming indifference to the cold (4)?

3. Trace the man's changing attitude toward the old-timer from Sulphur Creek. Why does he resist the old man's advice? Why does he acknowledge, as he lies dying, that the old man was right?
4. Given the opportunity to make this journey again, under similar circumstances, do you think he would take it? Or do you think he learned something of significance from this experience that would alter his behavior or attitudes in the future?
5. What do *you* learn from his experience?

D. Assessing the Man

1. What do you think of the man? Do you regard him as an admirable hero—independent, resourceful, rugged, and resilient? Or a reckless fool—proud, overconfident, unimaginative, and blind? As something in between? In some other way? Explain, using specific examples and evidence from the text.
2. Had he successfully made it back to camp, would your judgment of him differ? (*Note: In an earlier version of the story by London, the man survives, although he suffers terribly from frostbite.*)
3. What do you think of the man's purposes? Are they less worthy than those of other adventurers? Why, or why not?
4. What do you think London thinks of his own protagonist?
   a. Might the unforgiving, frigid environment that London depicts—an environment that seems altogether to resist human intentions—provide a clue?
   b. Might London's own stylistic devices—for example, his numerous repetitions of words like "cold," "know," "fire," and so forth—provide a clue?
5. Is the man (or a failing of his character) responsible for what happens to him? Or is he just an unlucky victim of an accident ("It happened")?
6. Is the man a tragic hero? Is the story an American tragedy?

V. Thinking with the Text

Americans have traditionally been known for, and generally proud of, their independence and self-reliance, their freedom and individualism, their enterprising and adventurous spirit, their courage and endurance in grappling with the forces of nature, their success through science and technology in making the world a more hospitable place for human

life. These national traits of character, long celebrated in stories of exploration, adventure, the settling of the frontier, and the founding of industries are in fact encouraged by the American creed as it emerges through our founding principles and documents. So, for example, the Declaration of Independence conceives of human beings as free-standing, independent individuals, and it asserts that each of us has an inalienable right to pursue our own happiness, as each judges best. The United States Constitution established a large commercial republic, largely in the belief (defended in *Federalist* 10) that encouragement of material self-interest is far less threatening to stable and free government than is a politics dominated by zeal for high-minded opinion (be it religious, philosophical, or political) or a politics dominated by passionate attachment to charismatic leaders and ambitious men. The Constitution also embraced the goal of progress in natural science and the useful arts by calling for copyright and patent protection for authors and inventors. (Students and readers are encouraged to read these founding documents to better appreciate the questions that follow.) London's story invites reflection on these features of the American character, with an eye to identifying and assessing their strengths and their weaknesses.

A. American Individualism (For these questions, consider the story in conjunction with the Declaration of Independence.)

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the "rugged individual"? Of the self-reliant human being? Of the risk-taking individual? Give some examples of the rugged individual in literature, in movies, or in your own life. What do we admire about these people? What do we find lacking in them?
2. Could America have become what it is today without risk takers like London's protagonist? Or is there a difference between him and the risk takers who tamed the wilderness and settled the frontier? If so, what is it?
3. Who are the risk takers in America today? Or do you think America is running out of risk takers? Does it matter? Is there any merit to the man's risk taking, or is it simply foolish?
4. What does London's story tell us about the strengths and weaknesses of American individualism? How might we correct for those weaknesses? Does London's story have any advice for us?
5. Could London's no-named man be any man from anywhere? Could any other country or culture produce him?

B. American Acquisitiveness and Enterprise (For these questions, consider the story in conjunction with the *Federalist* 10.)

1. Are Americans more likely to be motivated by money than by other more exalted motives (e.g., religious piety, love of honor, or desire for fame)? Why or why not? If yes, should we be ashamed of this?
2. How should we judge people who undertake dangerous enterprises not from piety or the love of honor, but from a desire for wealth?
2. Some people claim that the American Republic is based on a "low but solid foundation," namely, a foundation comprising self-interest, the love of gain, and a primary concern for material well-being. What might be the consequences—both good and bad—of this orientation for the morality and character of American citizens?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: Unlike the rather romanticized *Little House on the Prairie*, these guys are on the frontier for gold. They're not family men. The conceit of human nature that's behind the Declaration of Independence doesn't begin with us in families; it begins with us as isolated individuals. For the Declaration, it is the individuals who have rights—not groups, and not even families. There is a certain encouragement of this, though the perpetuation of life itself depends upon the bachelors giving up the gold, building the log cabins, and recognizing that they are mortal and need to provide for those that come after them.

Amy Kass: One other thing you didn't mention is that this is a man without any tradition. That is evident in the way in which he stands with respect to the advice of the old-timer, the man from Sulphur Creek, who tells him that when it is 50 degrees below zero, you should build a fire or take a companion with you. So he takes the Declaration of Independence, the radical individuality, to its ultimate end.

William Schambra: On the one hand, though, we as a nation cannot do without that. We would not have been America without the bachelors who were willing to throw themselves into the wilderness from the very beginning of the nation—and

yet you are suggesting that that is not enough.

Leon Kass: The Constitution does not simply rely on the solitary individual when it sets about constituting a republic that is going to safeguard the rights of individuals. Insofar as we are a large commercial republic, it encourages self-interest, but, at the same time, it requires additional things. It requires certain kinds of cooperation. There are certain virtues that go along with this in order for trade to be possible. Self-interest carries with it things that moderate the isolation and the mere selfishness that might otherwise be encouraged here.

For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.

C. Science, Technology, and the Mastery of Nature

1. Are there limits to our efforts to control and tame nature? If so, what are they, and how can we discover them?
2. Does our reliance on science, with its emphasis on measurement and quantification of the appearances of things, blind us to certain deeper truths about nature and our relation to it? (Consider, in this regard, the strengths and weaknesses of living in the world guided by—as in the story—watches and thermometers.)
3. Can science and technology provide the wisdom needed for living with science and technology? If not, can we gain such wisdom from stories like this?

IN CONVERSATION

Amy Kass: This is a man who has a kind of technological expertise. First and foremost, he knows how to build a fire, and by the end of reading this story we all know how to build a fire. And we all know how cold it can get and how a fire really stands between you and death. But the other thing about him that really emphasizes this brute individualism or the separatism of this kind of American individual is that London has this take place on a sunless day, which we are reminded of many times. This means, among other things, that the man does not

have a shadow, which means that he is somehow disconnected—and disconnected even from his inner life.

Leon Kass: There are lots of things that a man without imagination doesn't imagine—and young people like this man perhaps more than others, thanks to the fact that they have more blind hope than the rest of us. They don't see the day of doom before them: not just today and not just tomorrow, but not at all. To add to that, this man has got temperature. He has taken cold and measured it according to the tools of science and interpretation. But the human meaning of being cold in the world is not there. He has a watch, and when the fire is put out, the thing that bothers him is that he is going to be an hour late getting to camp. To live by the clock and to take confidence in the way in which we have measured time or measured the world is, in part, to give us great power in nature, but it blinds us to the things that the quantification of the world has made invisible to us. And that is modern man, it is technological man, and that is American life. This story shows us something of the insufficiency, the tragedy, and power of it.

Amy Kass: London seems to suggest, both through his language and through the numerous repetitions in the story, that necessity is much greater than you are. Nature is much bigger than you are. And, finally, when this man tips his hat to the old man whom he has been resisting all this time and acknowledges he was right, he seems to be suggesting we have to submit.

Leon Kass: Well, submit? Or that we have to acknowledge our dependence on one another? The old man did not say, "Don't go out if it is colder than 50 degrees below zero." He says, "Don't go out alone."

For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.

4. What is, and what should be, our attitude toward the natural world, especially if nature is indifferent to human beings and often hostile to our purposes? Who in the story is a better model, the man or the dog?
5. Is human life unavoidably tragic, technology or no technology (fire or no fire)?
6. What does the story teach us about death? The man realizes that he wants to "meet death with dignity" (as opposed to "running around like a chicken with

its head cut off") (14). What do we mean when we talk of meeting death with dignity?

Writing Prompts:

- Is the man in "To Build a Fire" recognizably or typically American? After reading the story, write an explanatory essay that addresses the question and analyzes traits that you would consider to be typically American, providing examples to clarify your analysis. What conclusions or implications can you draw? (Informational or Explanatory/Analysis)

- What is, and what should be, our attitude toward the natural world, especially if nature is indifferent to human beings and often hostile to our purposes? After reading "To Build a Fire," write an essay that addresses the question and support your position with evidence from the text. (Argumentation/Analysis)

- Is the man a hero or a fool?—or something else? What if he had made it back to camp? After reading "To Build a Fire," write an essay that discusses your view of the man and evaluates his actions. Be sure to support your position with evidence from the text. (Argumentation/Evaluation)