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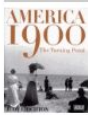


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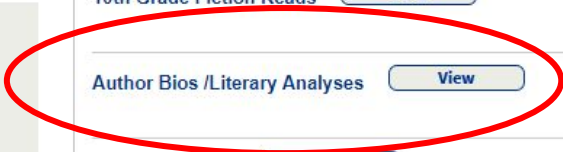
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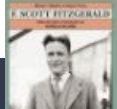
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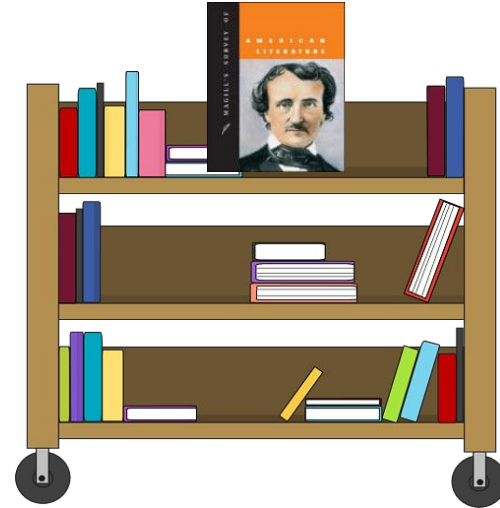
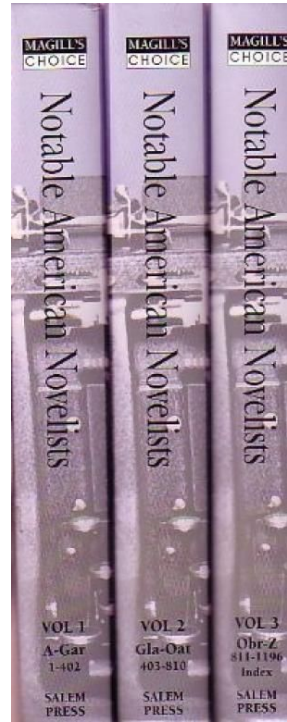
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Jack London



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Jack London

by David Mike Hamilton

Other literary forms

Jack London's fifty-nine published works include plays, children's fiction, sociological studies, essays, short stories, and novels. Although generally known as a writer of short fiction, London is also remembered for his pioneering work in tramp nonfiction (*The Road*, 1907) and the science-fiction novel (*The Star Rover*). London also was a journalist, serving as a newspaper correspondent for the *San Francisco Examiner* during the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 and, later, during the Mexican conflict in Veracruz in 1915. His accounts of these wars were published in 1970 as **Jack London Reports**. London's correspondence was first published in one volume in 1965.

Jack London

(Library of Congress)



Achievements

Called at one time the Kipling of the Klondike, **Jack London** was in the forefront of the move toward naturalistic fiction and realism. His social fiction, which included the first sympathetic and realistic treatment of the convict and the tramp, gave him credence as a spokesperson for the working class. As a folk hero, London has achieved a popularity that may make him, along with Mark Twain, a permanent figure in American mythology. London also remains extremely popular in Europe and the Soviet Union. His work has been translated into more than fifty languages, and his stories appear in countless anthologies of short fiction. His novels, especially *The Sea-Wolf* and *The Call of the Wild* are taught in high school and college English courses, and a number of his books remain in print year after year. London's reputation as a solid craftsman—especially of short stories—has been established, even among literary critics. His novels, regarded by many as weak and unpolished, gained in stature in the late twentieth century as more critics found London's work a subject worthy of discussion.

Biography

A sometime tramp, oyster pirate, seaman, Socialist, laundryman, and miner, **Jack London** is as famous for the life he lived and the myths he wove around it as he is for the short stories and novels he wrote. Largely self-educated, London was the product of California ranches and the working-class neighborhoods of Oakland. Born in San Francisco on January 12, 1876, his rise to literary fame came as a result of the Klondike gold rush. Unsuccessful in his attempt to break into the magazine market, London joined the flood of people rushing toward instant riches in the Yukon. He found little gold but returned after the winter of 1897 with a wealth of memories and notes of the North, the gold rush, and the hardships of the trail. By 1900, London had firmly established himself as a major American writer.

Also in 1897, London married Elizabeth May Madden. The couple settled in Oakland, soon adding two daughters to their family. In 1904, seeking new material for his stories and escape from his marriage, which by this time had gone sour, London signed with publisher William Randolph Hearst to cover the impending Russo-Japanese War for Hearst's newspaper the *San Francisco Examiner*. London's photographs and accounts of that war were among the first to be published, and he returned to California in triumph, only to face a divorce action.

London's next years were marked by further adventures and travels. In 1905, he journeyed across the United States, lecturing on the need for a socialist revolution. He married Clara Charman Kittredge that same year, and together they planned a seven-year voyage around the world on a yacht they named *Snark* after Lewis Carroll's mock epic. Ill health forced abandonment of the adventure after only two years, however, and London returned once more to California, this time to create a large ranch complex in Sonoma County.

To support his travels and building program, as well as an extravagant lifestyle, London wrote at a furious pace, publishing fifty books by the time he was forty years old. His body could not withstand the brutal treatment it received, however, and he died on November 22, 1916. His death, officially labeled uremic poisoning and renal colic, was widely rumored to have been suicide. The mysterious circumstances surrounding his death have never been explained satisfactorily.

Analysis

Jack London's fame as a writer came about largely through his ability to realistically interpret humanity's struggle in a hostile environment. Early in his career, London realized that he had no talent for invention, that in his writing he would have to be an interpreter of the things that are, rather than a creator of the things that might be. Accordingly, he drew his plots, characters, themes, and settings from real-life experiences and published accounts.

London's career as a novelist began shortly after the turn of the twentieth century with the publication of *A Daughter of the Snows*. It ended nineteen novels later with the posthumous publication of *The Assassination Bureau, Ltd.*, in 1963. The novels vary widely in length, subject matter, and (especially) artistic quality, for while London could write bold, violent, and sometimes primitive short stories of immense power, depicting the frontier environment and the human struggle within it in memorable fashion, his novels oftentimes suffered from weakness of structure and excessive didacticism. London's failure of invention, never a significant problem in his short stories, all too

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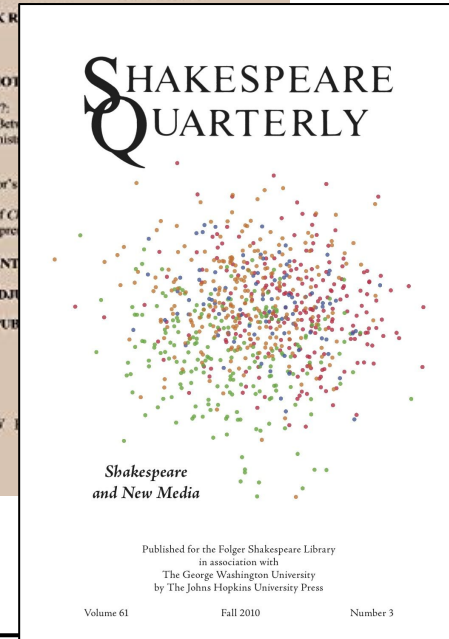
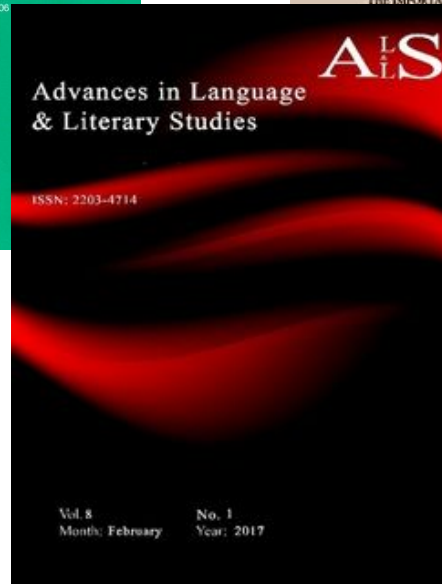
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Keith Newlin.

Journeys.

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Save

Full-text: *WORK OVERVIEW, CRITICAL ESSAY*

An overview of 'To Build a Fire,'

Jill Widdicombe.

Gale Online Encyclopedia.

Detroit, MI: Gale. Word Count: 1485. From *Literature Resource Center*.

[Widdicombe is a freelance editor of college textbooks who lives in Alaska. In the essay below, she examines the mysterious effect of the merciless cold in "To Build a Fire" and in everyday Alaskan life.] The third...

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Full-text: *WORK OVERVIEW, CRITICAL ESSAY*

The Call of the Wild: Overview

Leonard R.N. Ashley.

Reference Guide to American Literature.

Ed. Jim Kamp. 3rd ed. Detroit, MI: St. James Press, 1994. Word Count: 1410. From *Literature Resource Center*.

In the Soviet Union, Jack London is regarded as one of the greatest of American writers, chiefly because of such sentiments as are found in now-obscure works of his such as "A Night with the Philomaths." There he has a...

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To Build a Fire (Sho... (10)

The Red One (Short s... (9)

Ed. Jelena O. Krstovic. Vol. 133. Detroit, MI: Gale. *Word Count: 6951*. From *Literature Resource Center*.

[(essay date 1996) In the following essay, Berkove argues that "The Red One" reflects London's interest in a myriad of different theories and influences--Freudian and Jungian psychology, Darwinism, mythology, skepticism,...



Full-text: *CRITICAL ESSAY*

Fictional Experimentation

Jeanne Campbell Reesman.

Jack London: A Study of the Short Fiction. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999. p94-125.

Rpt. in *Short Story Criticism*.

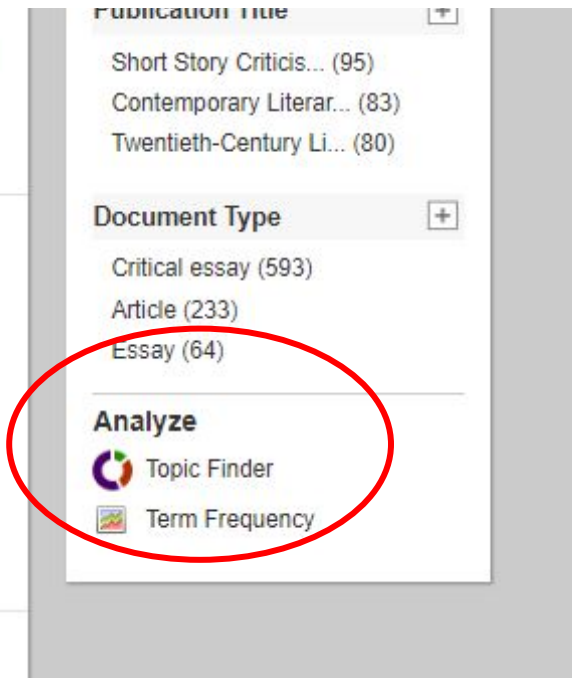
Ed. Jelena O. Krstovic. Vol. 133. Detroit, MI: Gale. *Word Count: 15440*. From *Literature Resource Center*.



[(essay date 1999) In the following essay, Reesman discusses London as a radically experimental writer who was able to successfully convey unusual characters, settings, and subject matter during his short but prolific...



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The Red One

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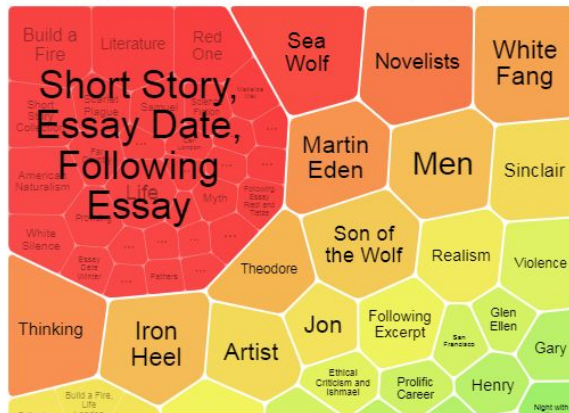
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Literature Criticism (5)

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Keeping His Head: Repetition and Responsibility in London's 'To Build a Fire'

Lee Clark Mitchell.

Journal of Modern Literature 13.1 (Mar. 1986): p76-96.

Rpt. in Short Story Criticism.

Ed. Justin Karr. Vol. 49. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2002. Word Count: 3536. From *Literature Resource Center*.

[Lee Clark Mitchell is affiliated with Princeton University. In the following excerpt, she discusses how London's repititious writing style in "To Build a Fire" ultimately undermines the meaning of his language.] Even...



Full-text: CRITICAL ESSAY

'No Ties Except Those of Blood': Class Race, and Jack London's American Plague

David Raney.

Papers on Language & Literature 39.4 (Fall 2003): p390-430.

Rpt. in Short Story Criticism.

Ed. Jelena O. Krstovic. Vol. 133. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2002. Word Count: 13947. From *Literature Resource Center*.[(essay date fall 2003) In the following essay, Raney discusses The Scarlet Plague as a contagion narrative that explores London's conflicted views on race and class.] Upton Sinclair in *The Jungle* (1906), a book littered...

Full-text: CRITICAL ESSAY

Jack Spicer and San Francisco's Lost Bohemia

Dana Gioia.

Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture. St. Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 2004. p121-126.

Rpt. in Poetry Criticism.

Ed. Michelle Lee. Vol. 78. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2007. Word Count: 2030. From *Literature Resource Center*.

[(essay date 2004) In the following essay, Gioia offers an assessment of Spicer's literary reputation among the San Francisco

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Name of Work

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Journal of Modern Literature 13.1 (Mar. 1986): p76-96. Rpt. in *Short Story Criticism*. Ed. Justin Karr. Vol. 49. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2002. From *Literature Resource Center*.

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[Lee Clark Mitchell is affiliated with Princeton University. In the following excerpt, she discusses how London's repetitious writing style in "To Build a Fire" ultimately undermines the meaning of his [language](#).]

Even enthusiasts cringe at naturalism's style. Given excesses so plain and a motion so plodding, sensible critics have simply dropped the subject. And perhaps the greatest embarrassment has been caused by [Jack London](#), whose flat prose seems especially open to criticism. His very methods of composition prompt a certain skepticism; the speed with which he wrote, his suspiciously childish plots, perhaps even his self-advertising pronouncements have all convinced readers to ignore the technical aspects of his fiction.

Yet good manners seem misplaced once we grant that literature need not appear a certain way, since it is difficult to see then what it might mean to reject a work's style as inappropriate. Indeed, the very strangeness of naturalism's vision emerges so vividly in its prose that wrenched stylistic maneuvers soon seem to the point. As we have come to acknowledge with cubist perspectives, metaphysics shapes style, not maladroitness. Once admit certain large claims about time and character, and naturalism appears less inadequate to conventional criteria than at last merely inaccessible to them. Or vice-versa, allow the contorted styles of naturalism to achieve their effect, and customary assumptions about time and character all of a sudden begin to erode. Such writing clearly testifies to what is for most an alien vision of experience and, therefore, almost by definition veers from realist standards. But it is far from inept.

Still, all of this risks too much too soon by linking the varied styles of naturalism to individual author's control. What we need to do here is merely to loosen our critical categories and to agree that while metaphysics may not disprove maladroitness, at least maladroitness can be approached as a kind of after-the-fact metaphysic. Postponing for the moment, that is, the question of London's ultimate purpose, we can simply describe what happens in one seemingly rough-hewn work—his short story, "[To Build a Fire](#)" (1906).

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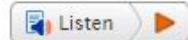
Short story, 1908

American Writer (1876 - 1916)

Other Names Used: London, John Griffith; Chaney, John Griffith;

LitFinder Contemporary Collection. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2010.

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"**To Build a Fire**" (1902) is one of the most redoubtable and frequently anthologized short stories of Jack London (1876-1916). The piece first appeared in *Youth's Companion* in 1902 but was considered strictly a children's cautionary tale. A revised version was published in *Century* magazine in 1908 and collected in London's volume of short fiction titled *Lost Face* (1910). Both versions concern human's struggle for survival in nature, but the latter incarnation of the narrative ends in the death of the protagonist.

In the first published version of "**To Build a Fire**," the protagonist, Tom Vincent, ignores the warnings of seasoned prospectors never to travel alone in the Alaskan wilderness during severe cold. Overconfident, Tom sets out on his own and quickly encounters a series of accidents—falling into freezing water, burning his hands—that threaten his life. After successfully starting a fire, he limps back to camp the next morning, humble and wiser from his experiences. In the revised version, considered the definitive "**To Build a Fire**," the now-unnamed protagonist travels into the wilderness accompanied by a half-wild dog. After experiencing a series of misfortunes similar to those described in the story's original incarnation, the man struggles to construct a fire but is ultimately unable to do so. Eventually, he resigns himself to his approaching death, realizing that his hubris has

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