

許文馨

Literary Criticism (I)

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### A Modern Tragic Hero

“Day had broken cold and gray, exceedingly cold and gray, ...” (London, 341). In the first sentence of Jack London’s famous short story “To Build a Fire,” the protagonist’s future has been already predestinated to be a gloomy one. Indeed he was frozen to death in the end. But “under the stars that leaped and danced and shone brightly in the cold sky” (357), he seemed to die in peace.

Like many other tragic hero in Greek dramas, this lonely traveler’s tragic flaw was pride. He was so proud and self-conceited that when he “paused for breath at the top [of a steep bank],” he even had to “excusing the act to himself by looking at the watch” (341). This is also the first hint of his tendency to self-deception that later led him towards his death.

Despite his flaw that was similar to the ancients’, he was not one of the traditional tragic heroes that Aristotle had defined as “people with a great reputation and a good fortune” (Aristotle, 100). On the contrary, he was just an ordinary “new comer in the land [Yukon]” (342) who did not listen to the advice of “the old timer on Sulphur Creek” (349) but insisted on going out all by himself into a severely cold weather. The reason why he was alone was that he made a de tour to see whether they

could get logs in the winter from the islands in Yukon. And he was determined to challenge the ruthless nature and to reexamine the laws that had been obeyed since humans, out of fear for the coldness, set them up a long time ago and later passed them down from generation to generation. Because of his challenge to “the seemingly strong cosmos [principles] around us” (Miller), he was more like the tragic heroes that Arthur Miller had proposed as “those who act against the scheme of things that degrades them.”

In this short story, the old timer on Sulphur Creek represented “those who accept their lot without active retaliation” (Miller) and he “had been very serious in lying down the law that no man must travel alone in the Klondike after fifty [degrees] below” (London, 349). The traveler quite despised him because he thought that “those old timers were rather womanish. All a man had to do was to keep his head, and he was all right” (349). This showed his pride and ignorance, and to excuse his ignorance, he often deceived himself.

For several times the cold startled him, and he was from surprised, stunned, to panic, but he was always able to “fought against it and kept clam” (351) because he kept fiddling his own heart with hopes that “he was bound for the old claim on the left fork of Henderson Creek, where the boys were already” (342), that “he would kill the dog and bury his hands in the warm body until the numbness went out of them. Then

he could build another fire” (353). Later as all his hope of building a fire was fading, he convinced himself that “maybe, if he ran on, his feet would thaw out; and anyway, if he ran far enough, he would reach camp and the boys” (355).

Self-deception was also his tragic flaw in a modern sense, which Arthur Miller had defined as “his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status” (Miller). Self-deception is often the tragic flaw in modern tragic heroes because they are always impotent to change anything in reality even though they struggle hard, so they have to deceive themselves so as to live on.

And in this novel, the struggle of the hero was embodied as all he had wanted to do, “to build a fire,” as indicated in the title of this short story. The fire symbolized *life*; “it meant life, and it must not perish” (535). Therefore, the theme of this short story is to live. But it is ironical that the protagonist’s attempt to build a fire (to live) was always ruined by himself, his ignorance. First he built a fire under a tree, and the snow on it fell down and extinguished the fire. Then he dropped all his matches on the snow because his hands were too rigid to grip them tight. Finally he realized that there was no hope for him alone to build a fire, and the frozen part of his body was extending. At this terrible recognition of his death sentence, he was first driven into a wild, aimless running. The panic was too great.

After quite a while, his feet had become too tired to carry him any further, he dropped down and thought that “he had been making a fool of himself, running around like a chicken with its head cut off. Well, he was bound to freeze anyway, and he might as well take it decently” (356). Thus was his “conception of meeting death with dignity” (356). When he still had hope, he struggled to live on, and during the struggle, he showed his courage to fight against the icy wilderness. But when there was no hope for him, he chose to accept his fate with calmness, which is also an alternative to show his braveness: to accept what is irreversible composedly.

And therefore, death, feared by most people, was to the traveler the most comfortable thing. “Then the man drowsed off into what seemed to him the most comfortable and satisfying sleep he had ever known,” the final rest after a tiring battle with nature.

Who won the battle? It may seem to most readers that the great strong nature defeated the fragile man, and the man’s death was a futile one because if he could have listened to the old timer, he would not have lost his life. However, when he died, the starry night sky, as mentioned in the beginning of this essay, seemed to glorify the man’s death. Even though it is a defeat, it is a most glorious defeat because he had done all he could.

### Work Cited

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