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Trabajo de Fin de Grado

**AMERICAN NATURALISM: MAIN
NATURALIST ELEMENTS IN JACK
LONDON'S ARCTIC TALES**

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ABSTRACT. The main aim of this paper is to analyze the naturalist elements that can be found in Jack London’s works; in my opinion, he is one of the best American representatives of this movement. In order to elaborate a proper analysis it was necessary to study both realism and naturalism in Europe and in America, since we cannot understand the American tendencies without taking into account what happened in Europe first. As for Jack London, I decided to focus my study on two of his best known Arctic tales, since they comprised the themes that most interested me, the struggle for existence and the conflict man versus nature.

RESUMEN. El principal propósito de mi trabajo es analizar los elementos del naturalismo que pueden encontrarse en las obras de Jack London; en mi opinión, considero que él es uno de los mejores representantes americanos de este movimiento. Para realizar un correcto análisis de dichas obras, era necesario el estudio del realismo y el naturalismo tanto en Europa como en América, ya que no podemos comprender el movimiento americano si no tenemos en cuenta lo que pasó en Europa primero. En lo que se refiere a Jack London, he decidido centrarme en dos de sus más conocidas historias del Ártico, puesto que en ellas pude encontrar los temas que más me interesaban, estos son la lucha por la existencia y el conflicto del hombre contra la naturaleza.

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1. INTRODUCTION

My final year dissertation is going to deal with the very well-known American naturalist writer Jack London and the analysis of two of his best known arctic tales, “Love of Life” and “To Build a Fire”. I decided to focus on those stories because in my opinion Jack London’s narratives dealing with adventurous men heading to the Yukon prospecting for gold are the ones that best capture the essence of naturalism. Another reason why I chose such stories is that they contain the elements that I wanted to study in my final essay: men’s fate in the arctic tales, the indifference of environment and some other distinguishing elements of the movement. Both “Love of Life” and “To Build a Fire” tell the story of a man who is placed in a harrowing environment where he will have to fight for survival; the conflict of man versus nature is at its peak in both stories and it is interesting to compare the two different outcomes in those two stories. Thus, the main aim of my essay is to study Jack London’s works so as to identify the extremely naturalist features that they show –on the whole, he regarded human beings as victims of the natural laws.

I also want to mention why I decided to devote my final paper to the study of Jack London. The reason is that I read one of his stories long ago and I liked it so much; afterwards, I did some research upon his life and I discovered that his stories had a lot of autobiographical features. The adventures that are told in his writings are inspired by his own experiences, and I found that fascinating; maybe that is the reason why his stories seem so real to me. Therefore, this essay gave me the opportunity to study Jack London down to the last detail and I did not want to miss that chance.

Another reason why I chose this topic for my final paper was one of the subjects that I had this year at university; it was “North American Literature” by María Jesús Hernaéz. One of its compulsory readings was “To Build a Fire” and that is how I came across Jack London again. One of the things that she used to tell us in class is that no matter how many times you read a story, you always find something new. So I decided to write my paper on Jack London in order to see how I reacted to the story that I had read years ago, “Love of Life”, now that I am more prepared to analyze it than before, and I can comprehend things that I did not even imagine when reading the story for the first time. That could be why the analysis of “Love of Life” is longer and more thorough than the one concerning “To Build a Fire”.

Thanks to “North American Literature”, my perspective towards the study of literature changed very positively; María Jesús wanted us to realize that our ideas in class were as important as what other critics had previously said, she wanted us to value our own notions, and she wanted us to develop a critical approach to literature, not just to say what others had already proposed. To sum up, that subject was what encouraged me to choose my paper’s topic and my tutor.

Going back now to the paper, as Jack London is included in the naturalist movement I consider it important to make an introduction to realism and naturalism in order to gather the main characteristics of both movements with a view to contextualizing the analysis that I am going to elaborate later on.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE MOVEMENTS

I decided to start my paper with the analysis of the movements, which will consist of several parts. When I started my research on both realism and naturalism I became aware of how difficult it was to provide a well-elaborated definition. I thought it was a good idea to introduce the philosophical and literary premises of the movements first, and then to study the movements in Europe before focusing on the American tendencies.

2.1 INTRODUCING THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND LITERARY PREMISES OF REALISM AND NATURALISM

In this section, I will make a succinct introduction to both realism and naturalism, which are two of the most important movements in American literature; I will just address briefly the issues of the origins of these tendencies and the writer's reaction against romanticism. Therefore, the aim of this section is to define such movements in its broad sense, in order to focus on its distinctive features later on in my essay.

First of all, I want to talk about the possible origin of these tendencies in America. Richard Lehan, in his book *Realism and Naturalism; the Novel in an Age of Transition*, claimed that most of the times the starting point of a new literary movement has its causes in certain changes that are taking place in society and also they can be a reaction against previous movements and its ideas. In the case of realism in America, "the death of an agrarian society and the birth of an industrial one produced a change both in the subject matter and technique of the novel" (Lehan 2005, 4); therefore, realism was in part a consequence of this change into an industrial society. These ideas may be right, but we must also bear in mind another important notion when speaking of the birth of American realism, which is that of the influence of the European movements, which was extremely noticeable in naturalism; I will expand on this issue in the following points of my essay and now I will concentrate on how writers reacted against romanticism.

As Lehan declared, with realism gaining force American writers were no longer interested in the plots and the ideas that romanticism offered them, they rejected the heroes, and they rejected the plots with characters that followed sentiment; what they wanted were real themes and real characters that could mirror their society. These

writers were very concerned with the cause and effect events and consequently, they firmly believed that every act has its consequence. This is a very marked feature in Jack London's writings, where the actions performed by the characters will lead to certain consequences, and in many occasions these consequences will establish the difference between life and death. As for naturalism, Lehan considered that both movements went hand in hand, the main difference was that naturalism went one step forward:

Naturalism carried Realism one step further, added a biological and philosophical component to the writing of fiction, and stressed the connection between literature and science. Naturalism presumed that a theory of environment and heredity along with Darwinian and post-Darwinian theories of evolution would ground the literary work in a factual and scientific context. (Lehan 2005, 3)

Since some American writers responded against Romanticism, I think it is interesting to talk briefly about the different aspects of both romanticism and naturalism. Richard Lehan claims that Romanticism was the movement that could be found in America in the beginning of the 19th century, and naturalism was somehow a reaction against it, since it contains completely opposite ideas. While in romanticism, imagination was valued above other things, naturalism esteemed the use of factual basis in the elaboration of their narratives. The following quotation explains perfectly these dissimilarities:

Unlike Romanticism, which idealized life and valued imagination over fact, naturalism represented life as a harsh affair, relying on principles of objectivity based on detailed observation and insisting on the existence of external forces, especially heredity and environment, which were subject to laws of the natural universe. Naturalism saw art emerging from life, thought of it as the product of observation informed by craft, and believed that life ought to be the subject of art everywhere. (Lehan 2005, 6)

That is exactly how Naturalist writers perceived life; they saw art coming out of everything. Another difference between these movements is that naturalism focuses on the present problems whereas romantic writers wanted to recreate the past. In sum, we can understand the origins of these movements as a reaction to changes that were happening in history, a change in society's mentality and a reaction against the former tendencies that had taken place in America.

Nevertheless, trying to define American realism and naturalism is a hard work due to its complexity of ideas. The birth of both American movements is connected to the European ones. However, they did not run parallel in history; European realism and naturalism began first, that is why they had a huge effect on the American versions. Thus, in order to understand American realism and naturalism it is a must to possess certain knowledge on the subject of the foundations of such European movements. Having made this brief introduction, I would like to elaborate on some of the characteristics of the movements in question.

2.2 REALISM AND NATURALISM

As I have previously said, it is universally acknowledged that both realism and naturalism appeared earlier in Europe and therefore, it is unavoidable not to make reference to the European tendencies, since these American movements are closely linked to those that occurred there first. American authors were inspired and influenced by European writers. One of the possible connections that can be established between these tendencies is that both American and European realism and naturalism were born in an era where cities were growing bigger and bigger and the industrialization process was expanding at full speed. In other words, the environment where these tendencies flourished was more or less similar; however, despite their connection, they may not show exactly the same features.

2.2.1 *THE PROBLEM OF DEFINITION*

Nowadays, it is generally accepted that American realism and naturalism differ from the European tendencies, and therefore, there cannot be a general definition for these terms. In *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism*, Donald Pizer deals with the problems that scholars have to face while trying to provide a well-elaborated definition of these American literary movements. He holds that there are a lot of difficulties in the use of these terms, and that most of the problems arise from their flexibility and unreliability; for example, we cannot conceive realism just as the writer's attempt to create a faithful representation of reality or the production of an objective narrative, there is much more going on there.

In France, these movements transpired from the late 1850s to the late 1880s and as Pizer declared, “they contained self-conscious and full-scale ideologies; and they functioned within a coherent network of personal relationships for much of their existence.” (Pizer 1995, 4) On the contrary, if we draw our attention to America, realism started to flourish after the Civil War in 1865 and in the early decades of the 20th century, American writers preferred the other genre that marked this era, naturalism, a movement that lasted until the end of the Second World War, and in which Jack London is included. The fact that the American tendencies developed between periods of wars was the reason why history replaced ideology in the American movements, so the first dissimilitude that can be found while comparing them has its origin in their different historical backgrounds.

Another disparity was the use that people was making of these terms. According to George J. Becker, in Europe the terms realism and naturalism were used interchangeably while in America it was never like that; there, the terms were used to distinguish among a number of works of fiction which were produced by certain authors in the 1870s, 1880s, or in the 1890s. Becker objected to the use that was made of these terms in America. In spite of his efforts, people continued using them. Therefore, the terms started to be employed rather than to show the literary movement of a work of fiction, to indicate the period when that work was written. Donald Pizer makes this clear by saying that a historian could accept this method of classification between what was written in the 1870s and 1880s and what was produced at the turn of the century, providing that these works of fiction were new and interesting. Obviously, this was not a solution but at least it was better than having a diffuse idea of both American movements.

2.2.2 *THE MOVEMENTS IN EUROPE*

As for the European tendencies, I want to focus specifically on naturalism. The germ of this movement could be found in France, naturalism was imported by America from France, what is more: American naturalism was a watered-down version of French naturalism. It is widely known that naturalism derives from a biological model, for this reason it is indispensable to bring up here Darwin’s theory of evolution. Darwin was an English naturalist and geologist, he published his work *On the Origin of Species* in 1859; his theory was incredibly important in this literary field because it greatly

influenced many naturalist writers. In his theory of evolution, Darwin mainly claimed that we all come from a common ancestor; according to his studies, evolution is adaptive instead of progressive because it is based on a process called “natural selection”. Therefore, evolution is based on the capacity of individuals to adjust to its environment; the very well-known phrase “the survival of the fittest” was added by the English philosopher and biologist Herbert Spencer. This belief will be shared by Jack London, who placed his characters in extremely hostile environments where just the strongest ones had a chance to survive. His theory was the starting point of a new way of perceiving reality; it was a reference point in history.

Darwin elaborated his theories from a scientific perspective and Émile Zola (1840- 1902), the naturalist author par excellence, was the one who used his theories for writing, giving them a literary approach. It was in *Le Roman Expérimental* (1880) where he applied his interpretation of Darwin’s theory of natural selection to the writing of fiction. That work was very important indeed for the development of the movement; in it he explains how he elaborated his experimental method since he was aware of how remote seemed to a lot of people to think of a novel as an experiment and to relate it to science. He considered the novelist as follows:

The novelist functioned like a scientist, observing nature and social data, rejecting absolute standards of morality and free will, and depicting nature and human experience as a deterministic and mechanistic process. All reality could be explained by a biological understanding of matter, subject to natural laws, available in scientific terms. Controlled by heredity and environment, man was the product of his temperament in a social context. (Pizer 1995, 47)

Zola also changed the viewpoint towards the novel and its important aspects, temperament was the most noteworthy factor for him “temperament was more important than character; setting could not be separated from a naturalistic theory of environment, nor plot from theories of evolution” (Pizer 1995, 47) Basically Zola “gave rise to a narrative methodology, a way of seeing reality, that left its mark on both sides of the Atlantic”. (Pizer 1995, 62)

All his ideas are based on the previously elaborated method by Claude Bernard dealing with medicine in his work *Introduction à L’Étude de la Médecine Expérimentale*. Zola applied that work to literature; he says that you just have to change

a experimental doctor for a experimental novelist and everything works the same way. Zola always creates a parallelism between the illnesses that affect our bodies and the “wounds” that may be found in society. In order to heal such wounds we must act like doctors; we must discover its origins and try to provide a solution. Bernard came to the conclusion that “All experimental reasoning is based on doubt, for the experimentalist should have no preconceived idea, in the face of nature, and should always retain his liberty of thought” (Kettle 1972, 303).

Zola, as well as Bernard, will give a lot importance to the idea of observation; it all comes from what Claude Bernard asserted concerning the idea of an experiment: “The experimental idea is not arbitrary, nor purely imaginary; it ought always to have a support in some observed reality, that is to say, in nature” (Kettle 1972, 309). That is the reason why Zola regarded the novelists as being observers as well as experimentalists, since any experiment has its basis on an idea previously derived from observation. As stated by Zola, “it is undeniable that the naturalist novel, such as we understand it today, is a real experiment that a novelist makes on man by the help of observation” (Kettle 1972, 307). Hence, they claim that the experimental method has its origins in doubt and observation.

According to Bernard, and this idea will be shared by Zola, there is always one person who is the *experimentalist*, that is, someone who tends to use investigation so as to produce a change in the natural phenomena. For Zola, the experimentalist is the novelist who carries out experiments which consist on placing his characters in certain situations and see how they react. The function of the writer is therefore to observe and to interpret men’s actions and behavior upon certain situations. Zola considers himself and the rest of naturalist novelists as “the examining magistrates of men and their passions” (Kettle 1972, 308). As all of us know, we are social beings and consequently we need to live in a society; in sum, Zola considers that novelists must study men within that society (which is a product of men themselves), to study all his actions and experiences.

Taking this into account, we can reach the conclusion that Darwin’s theory of evolution and Claude Bernard’s ideas are crucial while understanding naturalism. Nevertheless, were naturalist writers just interested in the good sides of evolution? Or were they showing the worst sides of society instead? Can naturalist writers be

considered as optimistic or pessimistic? This is one of the dilemmas we may come across while studying this movement. Our understanding will depend on our own perspective while reading each novel.

In *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism* this duality of interpretations is explained, some authors wanted to recreate the most horrifying sides of human beings, or in other words, the worst side of evolution. They were doing this by means of giving birth to characters that were corrupted individuals; naturalism is therefore closely linked to degeneration and corruption. Zola firmly believed that this corruption had its roots in society's industrialization; the more industrialized society grown, the more corrupted individuals become: "modern man had been displaced from anything like a natural environment, had lost contact with his instincts and a more rudimentary sense of self, and had become more and more distanced from the rhythms of the natural life" (Pizer 1995, 59) What society needed to stop this process was to be in harmony with nature.

Considering all these conceptions, if the idea of distorted characters and stories depicting the worst sides of society is the only feedback we get while reading naturalism, we will remain in the pessimistic understanding of the whole movement. What we must do is to get a further interpretation; we have to look beyond pessimism and try to get some hope out of it, as long as society will continue evolving is a positive thing:

And yet naturalism, while admittedly pessimistic, seems to have an optimistic element built into it. This stems from the usually unexpressed belief that whereas the fate of the individual is circumscribed and destined to end in sickness and death, the fate of the species is to move ever onward and upward in an evolutionary march toward greater perfection. (Pizer 1995, 48)

Zola was one of these authors who used certain elements in order to intensify his character's degeneration. These elements are those of alcohol, poverty, political corruption...He also focused on the idea of the family's environment, if someone grew within a dysfunctional family, the likelihood of that character to become a deranged or a distorted individual throughout the fiction's development was higher.

Another innovation brought in by Zola which is also linked to the degeneration of the characters was the introduction of the *instincts*; after all, we are all animals.

Lehan's definition of human beings as animal-like beings governed by instincts seems to be the same as Zola's, since he pointed out that "an animal connection exists in us as a potential state to be aroused at moments of physical and emotional crisis, and the rise of this animality is always followed by a process of degeneration" (Pizer 1995, 63) The scholar Malcolm Cowley once said that precisely that theme, the theme of "the beast within", is one of the most recurrent themes of naturalist writers.

It is therefore not surprising that Jack London was very much influenced by this idea; he recreated it by means of placing his characters in such harsh environments where surviving was the only thing they could think of. As for the ideas related to the instincts and beasts it is important to allude to one of the most distinguishing features of Jack London's short stories: while reading them, we are very likely to encounter a wolf or a husky dog. If we are acquainted with wolves, we must know that they are untamed animals that can live in really hard conditions and are guided by their instincts. What Jack London does is to create parallelisms between wolves and his characters and to place them in certain scenarios where he shows us that we are not that different from animals after all. This idea will be further elaborated in the section entitled "Jack London as a naturalist writer".

On the whole, the most important things that we must bear in mind is that Darwin's theory of evolution and Zola's views and notions are indispensable in order to understand naturalism. Naturalism has its roots in France and Zola is considered to be its creator, everything that occurred in France affected the American movements. Having made this brief introduction to the European movements I want to draw the attention of my analysis to the American tendencies.

2.2.3 *THE MOVEMENTS IN AMERICA*

As I have noted before, while studying these tendencies in America we must be aware of the fact that they flourished between periods of war, in an atmosphere characterized by a growing industrialization process and that American authors were really influenced by those who stood out in the European movements.

As a matter of fact, these movements were rejected and criticized when they started to spread in America. Initially, the reason why these movements were discarded was that they came from Europe. In other words, some people thought that they were

not appropriate to transmit American values. Notwithstanding, both movements gained force quite quickly. According to Pizer, it was because of its capacity of adaptability and because of the reality that could be found in America at that time. With respect to this, Pizer maintained that “realism and naturalism constitute a critical response to the conditions of late-nineteenth century American life.” (Pizer 1995, 15) On the whole, American reality was so corrupted that writers used literature as a tool to criticize it.

Focusing now on American naturalism and in order to examine it deeper it is worth studying the figure of Charles Buchesky since his dissertation *The Background of American Literary Naturalism* focuses precisely on that movement. He defines naturalism as “the embodiment in literary expression of such a philosophical outlook toward the relationship between nature and man” (Buchesky 1971, 3) He pays specific attention to American naturalism and he goes through several definitions that other scholars have made about the movement.

According to Buchesky, one of the first attempts of defining American naturalism was that of Vernon L. Parrington; in 1922, he gave a lecture at the University of California and he regarded naturalism as *pessimistic realism*, so here we have again the unavoidable connection between naturalism and pessimism. Some years later, naturalism was defined by Harry Hartwick as “the philosophy of *laissez faire*”; Buchesky studies this scholar and he states that Hartwick regarded human beings as pieces of fate and animals as governed by instincts. The following scholar that analyzed the movement was Oscar Cargill, the deterministic philosophy already appeared in his definition, he defined naturalism as “pessimistic determinism”, it was like that for him because he considered that independently of our actions, our end would be that of decadence, doom and downfall. Therefore, it does not matter at all what we do because in the end it will be useless; we are not capable of shaping our own fate. In his studies Buchesky also discovered that the scholar Malcolm Cowley added his own perspective to the previous definitions; he contended that naturalism wanted to display the idea of human responsibility.

During the fifties and sixties, the theories developed by American scholars followed the same vein as the ones that I have already pointed out, naturalism was considered a pessimistic tendency and it was linked to determinism. Therefore, all these definitions are a bit incomplete since naturalism should not be restricted to pessimism.

Even if we consider naturalism as deterministic, which is quite right, we must also be aware of the good sides of the movement. Zola was aware of this misinterpretation of naturalism; he concluded that the problem was that determinism was confused with fatalism. These two concepts are very tricky; they are defined as follows “the fatalist says that what happens had to happen, whereas the determinist says that something happens because the conditions which cause it exist or are allowed to exist. To the extent that man, therefore, can alter conditions and phenomena he has free will” (Buchesky 1971, 12).

In conclusion, naturalists are not pessimistic because the theory of determinism contends that human beings have the possibility of altering their conditions. The French author Claude Bernard had also tackled the issue of determinism and fatalism; he said “the moment that we can act, and that we do act, on the determining cause of phenomena, by modifying their surroundings, for example –we cease to be fatalists” (Kettle 1972, 320)

The literary critic George W. Meyer was one of the authors that regarded naturalism as an optimistic movement; he wrote an article in 1942 entitled *The Original Social Purpose of the Naturalistic Novel* where he showed his disagreement concerning naturalism’s definition as pessimistic determinism and discussed its inconsistency, since according to those critics, any piece of work which shared a pessimistic view towards the human beings had to be naturalist.

Perhaps, one of the reasons of the connection between naturalism and pessimism is the character’s treatment; the protagonists always come from lower-middle classes and most of the times they are linked to unavoidable downfall. Naturalist writers consider that all of us must be aware of our own limitations “failure to make an accurate estimate of the relative strengths of determining forces and individual capabilities can lead to personal disaster, as it often does within the naturalistic novel” (Buchesky 1971, 31) In my opinion, this idea originates another dilemma in our lives: do we have to fight for what we really want? Or do we have to be conformist people? In Jack London’s works, this is depicted throughout the character’s ambitions in searching gold since these adventures often end up in a fatal denouement: death.

2.3 AMERICAN AUTHORS

In this section I would like to briefly consider some American authors that were writing along these years and that shared several distinctive features of these movements. Some of the most important American writers within these tendencies were Mark Twain, Henry James, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser and of course Jack London. The common feature of all these writers is that they started a change in the way of depicting the characters of their stories; the characters created by the realist writers acted according to their sense of experience, a very well-known example is Huckleberry Finn, who was able to distinguish the right things from the wrong ones trusting his senses, his instincts.

Another common feature among the realist writers is that many of them, including Jack London himself, were journalists; if we think of the characteristics of realism, it is not strange that a lot of these authors devoted themselves to this profession so that they could report the daily events that took place in their cities and by doing so they enable themselves to develop the necessary tools in order to represent reality as truthfully as possible, which is the realist writer's maxim.

According to Lehan, is in these years when the term *muckraker* appeared for the first time, it refers to a group of journalists who were concerned with investigative reporting and who wanted to show the people the scandal, the waste, the social problems and the political corruption that was taking place in big cities. The most popular magazine where they were writing was *McClure's*, which was read mainly by middle class people. The muckrakers wanted to make people aware of the problems that the growing capitalist society was creating, being the most important one the difference between the rich and the poor people, which may be the reason why many realists and naturalist writers draw their attention to the poor ones and the outcasts.

Speaking now of American naturalist writers, they believed that the best way to give reality to their writings was by describing the worst aspects of society and by using marginalized and rejected characters:

While the naturalists sometimes depicted the upper class, they more often descended the social ladder to portray the world of the poor and the outcast, taking a stark look at what before were forbidden subjects. The naturalists felt that the more attention that was given to lower or deviant aspects of life –to poverty,

alcoholism, degeneration, and the dysfunctional family- the more “realistic” the writing would be. (Lehan 2005, 7)

According to Buchesky, naturalist writers studied men and their studies revealed that “man was a complex organism with reason, passions and various conflicting impulses”; most of naturalist writings are characterized by an explicit tension between free will, the struggle that the characters had to make so as to achieve their goals and the determining forces, which represented the hurdles that the characters had to go through in order to fulfill their aims. While analyzing American naturalism, it is important to bear in mind Frank Norris’s ideas.

Frank Norris is Zola’s counterpart since he is considered to begin the naturalist movement in America; he was an American novelist who wrote during the Progressive Era, a movement which took place in the beginning of the 20th century and which is mainly characterized by social activism. He worked for the *McClure’s* magazine, he attended Berkeley University and there he was very influenced by the ideas concerning human evolution, which are reflected in some of his writings. His best-known work is *The Octopus*, a novel written in 1901. Norris thought that violent, appalling and terrible things have to happen in naturalist writings “characters must be twisted away from the ordinary and brought to the edge of violence and sudden death in an heightened plot that worked itself out in an unleashing of passion” (Lehan 2005, 6). He said that in all human beings, there is always a volcano of violence waiting to erupt, and through his writings he specifically shows us that eruption. In his work he focused on the “force of nature” and deemed it as optimistic; he took into account the immensity of the cosmos and realized that we are insignificant if we compare ourselves to it, his optimism is linked to the workings of the universe “the operations of the universe are ultimately beneficent; and because of universal benevolence, the human race is destined to achieve happiness and progress in the world” (Buchesky 1971, 411)

Apart from Frank Norris and Jack London, there are another two American authors worth mentioning: Theodore Dreiser and Stephen Crane. In their fictions, “they studied man as a part of his environment because they believed that natural laws guided man toward the proper norms for human society” (Buchesky 1971, 415)

Stephen Crane (1871-1900), in *The Red Badge of Courage*, focuses on the force of determinism. The protagonist Henry Fleming, influenced by his readings of novels

dealing with battles, decides to join the army so as to participate in the Civil War. After his first battle he flees from the army; however, he comes back and finally he becomes a courageous soldier. By means of this transformation, Crane is making allusion to our capacity of adjusting to the environment. Another equally important naturalist author was Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945), *Sister Carrie*, along with *An American Tragedy* is one of his best-known works. In *An American Tragedy*, the protagonist Clyde Griffiths is a perfect example of how people are determined by society and the environment they grow up in.

Even if all these authors share a lot of naturalist elements, in my opinion Jack London's Arctic tales are quite unique. Instead of focusing on their characters within society, he decided to isolate them in order to turn them into human beings led by their most basic instinct: survival.

3. NATURALIST ELEMENTS IN JACK LONDON'S FICTION

Jack London (1876-1916) is one of the most significant American naturalist writers and he is an indispensable figure in American literature as well; it is in his Arctic tales where he best captures the essence of naturalism and that is why I decided to analyze two of those narratives.

After reading his biography I would dare to say that his life was as interesting as his writings; I would like to mention briefly certain things concerning his life because in my opinion, when studying Jack London it is a must to take into account certain aspects of his life since they played a crucial role in his fiction and non-fiction works. James L. Haley, in *Wolf, the Lives of Jack London*, wrote a biography which enables us to capture the essence of this author; he led a hard life as a child and in his youth; he was forced to start working at an early age and in really bad conditions. He called himself “the work beast” and these working experiences were what pushed him continually to pursue his dream of becoming a writer:

To pull out of this lethal whirlpool was imperative, and he determined, within the fire of his avid, urgent new curiosity about everything, to find a way to make a living with his mind instead of his muscles. He would learn, and then he would write. (Haley 2010, 78)

He was a passionate adventurer. His first published story was based on an episode he had lived himself; it was the story of a typhoon he came across while he was seal hunting in Japan. He travelled the country as a vagrant and in one occasion he was imprisoned for thirty days; when studying the Arctic tales, the most influential part of his life were his months as a prospector. As many other men, Jack London went to the Klondike hoping to make a fortune there searching for gold. His months in the Yukon did not make him rich, at least not immediately; that experience provided him with an enormous amount of literary material which he would use to write his stories in the future. For instance, the stories that I am going to analyze are set in the Klondike, and one of his best known works and his first big hit, *The Call of the Wild* (1903), is precisely the story of a winter in the Yukon River in 1898 as well. Jack London was not a lucky man in the Klondike; he got scurvy and had to go back to California with empty hands. It was there where he realized that he could not be a “work beast” anymore, and

he was determined to do something about it. He had been born to be a writer; it was his destiny and was firm to achieve it.

Since reading Nietzsche he had been enamored of the superman, but now had to confront his physical limitations and what they meant for his future: he could not be a Work Beast much longer. If he tried he would end as one of the hopeless wretches he encountered on the road, one of the lame tramps that desperately wanted to work but could not. He must find a way to earn his living with his mind. (Haley 2010, 110)

Focusing now on his narrative, I would like to examine briefly several themes and conflicts that appear in some of Jack London's works. It is impossible to talk about London without making allusion to the idea of the wilderness, which is one of his most distinguishing motifs. Therefore, many of his writings are placed in hostile environments where the individual has to fight for survival; the harsh circumstances that London's characters must face lead to another conflict very distinctive of his writings as well, the conflict man versus nature. Jack London uses this conflict in many of his Arctic tales, in which he places his characters in ruthless environments where they must fight for survival; therefore, in his narratives is impossible to find a nurturing nature which will offer them comfort and pleasure. On the contrary, we have a menacing environment that will threaten them with freezing temperatures, starvation, dangers, and death.

Many of Jack London's short stories are placed in the landscape of the so called "American North", that is Alaska; for this reason, I think it is of great interest to study some of the notions related to this vast piece of American land. As Roderick Frazier Nash declares in his book *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Alaska is the largest state of the USA and the one with the most extreme temperatures; the Americans were not the first settlers, aboriginal inhabitants such as the Inuit and Yupik were there before. The tundra, defined as a treeless area with permanently frozen subsoil supporting low-growing vegetation, is its most characteristic landscape.

John Muir, a Scottish-American naturalist, was really concerned with the idea of preservation of the American wilderness. In my opinion, I consider that what he once said about Alaska is very telling "To the lover of pure wilderness Alaska is one of the most wonderful countries of the world" (Nash 2001, 272). Alaska is therefore the

perfect representation of the wilderness, and, at the time of Jack London's works it was an unknown land, it was a hostile, trackless, dangerous environment. Jack London was aware of this, as he himself had been there, and that is why he knew that this land was perfect for the recreation of the conflict "man versus nature", just the strong ones could survive the harsh temperatures of the North.

Alaska was declared a state in 1959 and almost all its land could be called wilderness, in such vast area of land the population did not even reach 150.000 inhabitants, and the wilderness of Alaska was seen as a threat. In the 1960s, the governor of Alaska warned the possible future pioneers by saying this "The cold can kill you. The tundra can kill you. The beautiful sky can kill you...It's tough up here. This country can kill you...So the light you want to see, the finest light you can possibly see, is that first glimmer from a Coleman lantern in somebody's cabin" (Nash 2001, 273) Despite this, Alaska was the best destination for those adventurers who were seeking and wanted to be in touch with a wild nature, a real wilderness.

This idea of the wilderness was not introduced by Jack London; it has its origins in the Bible, where they made a clear distinction between the garden, where you could find a nurturing nature which takes care of you, and the wilderness, which stood for an unknown and menacing nature.

Jack London can be considered a naturalist writer not only because he describes a harsh environment where their characters are left alone to fight for their lives but also because he recreates some of the most important characteristics of naturalism in his fiction. For instance, in his Arctic tales the theme of "the beast within" is very recurrent, and it is an emblematic topic of the movement. Jack London had always in mind the idea of instincts and animality; he believed that there is not much that differentiate us from animals when we find ourselves in difficult conditions, we are living beings dominated by instincts as well. The tension between hope and despair and free will and deterministic forces are also displayed in his narrations.

Jack London had his own "philosophy" which was the result of the influence of Marx, Spencer, and Nietzsche. Because of this, his naturalism is manifested in different ways. After reading some of his stories and Brian Crew's article on London's philosophy, I consider that Herbert Spencer's doctrine was the biggest influence over him. In his fiction, there are a lot of connections with Spencer's philosophy, since his

characters struggle for survival and are determined by his heredity and environment; in many of his stories, the “fittest” are the ones who survive, which is precisely what Spencer claims. Jack London placed great value on the capacity of the individuals to adapt to the environment and to fight and struggle for survival. That is why he was also influenced by Nietzsche’s philosophy, concretely by Nietzsche’s superman. He combined both Spencer’s and Nietzsche’s philosophy to reach his own conclusion: the fittest of one species are those who are closer to become Nietzsche’s “superman”. As for Socialism, he was influenced by Marxist beliefs in the last period of his life; examples of this influence are *Martin Eden* and *The Iron Heel*.

In spite of all these influences, Jack London always thought that “Man is a victim of his destiny, and that destiny is for him to struggle a short while and then die. The efforts of the individual will have no effect upon the development of the species” (Crews 1989, 219) In a way, Jack London thought that the only law that governs our lives is the law of life. He even wrote a short story entitled like that which expresses a very harsh naturalistic vision: it is “The Law of Life”. In this story, we get to know the law of life through the words of Old Koskoosh, a member of a nomadic native tribe. This nomadic tribe has the tradition of abandoning old people when they can no longer contribute to the tribe or keep up with its rhythm. Koskoosh is no exception; thus, when he is left to die, he does not complain:

It was the way of life, and it was just. He had been born close to the earth, close to the earth had he lived, and the law thereof was not new to him. It was the law of all flesh. Nature was not kindly to the flesh. She had no concern for that concrete thing called the individual. Her interest lay in the species, the race.

4. ANALYSIS OF THE ARCTIC TALES

Now, I would like to introduce the two stories that I decided to analyse in order to exemplify Jack London's naturalist features; they are "Love of Life" and "To Build a Fire". From my point of view, these two stories are the perfect example of the conflict man versus nature, and that is the reason why I chose them. Both stories take place in the North territories and deal with the struggle of men to survive in such a harsh environment. The two aspects that are emphasized in most of Jack London's Klondike tales are cold and starvation, those elements are crucial for survival and are the elements used by London to carry out the transformation of his characters. In "Love of Life" Jack London will stress hunger whereas in "To Build a Fire" he will concentrate on the freezing temperatures.

One of the interesting things to point out in these stories is the character's fate; for example in "To Build a Fire" the character's destiny is already fixed from the beginning, we know that the man is going to perish due to inexperienced. On the contrary, in "Love of Life" the atmosphere is full of tension between hope and despair; we do not really know how the story will turn out, and it is the character's incredible willpower that gives him strength to keep on fighting till the end. However, the most important issues that we must take into account when reading these stories are the struggle for survival and the conflict man versus nature; having said this, I want to proceed to the elaboration of my analysis.

4.1. THE STRUGGLE FOR EXISTENCE IN "LOVE OF LIFE"

He contemplated the bones, clean-picked and polished, pink with the cell-life in them which had not yet died. Could it possibly be that he might be that ere the day was done! Such was life, eh? A vain and fleeting thing. It was only life that pained. There was no hurt in death. To die was to sleep. It meant cessation, rest. Then why he was not content to die? (London 1981, 155)

I have decided to initiate my analysis of "Love of Life" with the quotation above because it perfectly encapsulates the essence of the story, the message that Jack London wants to transmit. Life is what pains, yet we are reluctant to abandon it; the love of life we have in our inner selves is what pushes us to fight for it. "Love of Life" is the story of how obstinately a man can grasp life not to let it go away, this story represents our struggle for survival. The story opens in the Klondike, northwestern Canada in 1890.

We have two men that have been drawn to that hostile area because of the Klondike Gold Rush; that sparkling yellow element was the only reason for them to travel through the Yukon in the winter. Ambition can be the man's worst enemy, and in this story it will draw these men into an arduous journey for survival; their greed and their desire for wealth will act as a death trap for them. Everything has a price, and in the Klondike the price for gold must be paid with your life sometimes; that is precisely what happens in "Love of Life" since just one of the characters will survive.

In the beginning of the story we encounter two men, they have neither food nor ammunition; they are struggling for their lives in the Klondike, fighting against cold and starvation. Both men are travelling companions; they went to those Northern territories prospecting for gold, and after finding it they decided to go back home. The journey was difficult, a dumb move in such environment meant death. If we are familiar with Jack London's stories of the North, we will expect some of the characters to make a mistake which will trigger the fatal end. Our expectations are indeed fulfilled when the second man sprains his ankle while crossing a milky stream. His mistake meant that his possibilities of surviving decreased dramatically, his partner knows it too; in such a situation there is no room for compassion or goodwill. His friend, Bill (London only names him, he does not name the other character, to whom he will refer as *the man*) knows that if he stays with him, both of them will perish. His survival instinct and his selfishness compel him to abandon his mate. The man who is left alone turns to be the main character of the story. He will have to overcome unspeakable hardships in order to survive, and he is aware of it.

4.1.1 DESPERATION, HOPE AND "THE BEAST WITHIN"

I would say that desperation, hope and "the beast within" are the elements that Jack London uses so as to hatch his story. Psychologically speaking, there is constant battle between despair and hope in the character's mind. As for "the beast within", it is obvious that the character undergoes a change throughout the story which turns him into an animal-like human being governed by his most basic instincts.

Hence, I want to focus my analysis on the process of degeneration that the character suffers throughout the story; that is, how he is changed from a man of reason into a man of instincts. This process begins when he sprains his ankle and he is abandoned by his friend; his situation changes drastically and he begins to despair when

shouting at his friend for help, seeing no response “It was the pleading cry of a strong man in distress, but Bill’s head did not turn.” (London 1981, 142) Jack London compares the man to an injured animal who knows his destiny, he was left to die like a wounded deer, “the man watched him go and though his face was expressionless as ever, his eyes were like the eyes of a wounded deer” (London 1981, 142) As I have pointed out in the previous section, if we are taken out from society and placed in such unfriendly environment, there is not much that differentiate us from animals that must fight for their lives.

In this story, hope is one of the reasons why the man never stops fighting for his life; when we are left alone in a life or death situation, hope is what keeps ourselves apart from desperation. Bill meant hope for him, and that is why he refused to accept that his friend had abandoned him because he was probably going to die there. In order to survive he had to set new goals so as to keep his hope alive; he decided to follow the river Dease to find a cache where he would get ammunition and other essential tools to survive there, tools which would provide him with food. He thought that Bill was going to wait for him in that cache and after their reunion they would start heading south, in order to run away from the winter. He seemed reluctant to accept his own abandonment; he was just lying to himself with the purpose of avoiding becoming hysterical with despair:

But hard as he strove with his body, he strove equally hard with his mind, trying to think that Bill had not deserted him, that Bill would surely wait for him at the cache. He was compelled to think this thought, or else there would not be any use to strive, and he would have lain down and died. (London 1981, 145)

We know that Bill has indeed gone his own way because carrying an injured man through the Klondike was not a good scenario for surviving.

A common feature of Jack London’s fictions is that he subjects his character to a process of transformation; in “Love of Life”, the protagonist will become a man dominated by instincts and his values will no longer coincide with those he previously had. As Brian Crews claims in his article *Fate, Naturalism and the Individual in Jack London’s fiction*, “as time passes increasing weakness is not the only change that takes place in him. His values no longer coincide with those of society. The gold he carries is deemed worthless and left behind. There is no longer a place for ethics or etiquette”

(Crews 1989, 207). Taking this into account, he is no longer interested in the gold he possesses, "Again he divided the gold, this time merely spilling half of it on the ground. In the afternoon he threw the rest of it away, there remaining to him only the half-blanket, the tin bucket, and the rifle." (London 1981, 153) He becomes a practical man, and that is why he only keeps those things which are useful for him to survive in the Yukon. In addition, what is the use of gold if you are dead? As I pointed out in the introduction to the analysis of the stories, in "Love of Life", the most outstanding element used by Jack London to carry out the changes in his character is extreme hunger, which will lead the man to a state of insanity and will also contribute to his state of despondency.

If something characterizes Jack London's stories is that they seem so real that it is as if we were right there, next to the characters he recreates, feeling what they feel: desperation, hunger, deep cold. He accomplishes this by means of narrating the story as if we were listening to the character's thoughts. In "Love of Life" we go inside the character's mind, we know hunger through his thoughts; to get some nourishment is the only thing that occupies his mind, to eat is what his instincts demand. In such inhospitable landscape the man knew there was not much to eat. The only thing he could find were muskeg berries, so the man picked them up and put them in his mouth "the man knew there was no nourishment in the berries, but he chewed them patiently with a hope greater than knowledge and defying experience" (London 1981, 145) Despite the fact that he was aware of how useless it was to eat that berries, he swallowed them with the hope of gaining strength and continuing fighting for his life; the lack of nourishment accelerates the transformation of the man into a deranged being desperate to eat. The first sign of this distortion is that he starts to be obsessed and paranoid. He counted the matches he had left, divided them into three portions and kept them in separate places. Just after finishing this, he unwrapped all of them once more and counted them over and over again. This obsession is expanded to the rifle, he knew it was empty, he had no ammunition left to hunt; however, when he saw a caribou his desire to eat blinded his knowledge and he took the rifle and tried to shoot in vain, he was acting mechanically.

As I have mentioned before, the agent of all man's action is hunger, he was "mastered by the verb 'to eat'"; eating symbolized to keep on living and nothing was greater than his desire to live, which had replaced all rationality.

His ankle had stiffened, his limp was more pronounced, but the pain of it was as nothing compared with the pain of his stomach. The hunger pangs were sharp. They gnawed and gnawed until he could not keep his mind steady on the course he must pursue to gain the land of little sticks. (London 1981, 147)

As the story develops, the concerns of the man are reduced to the fulfillment of his vital necessities; taking this into account, the hungrier he is, the more animal-like he becomes. In his search for food, he again was blinded by desperation since he started to examine little ponds for frogs or worms, knowing that it was impossible to find those animals in such high latitude, it was too north for them. However, in this critical search he found a fish swimming in a little pool of water. The man began to bale the pool with a bucket so as to catch the fish and eat it. But he was not careful enough, he made another mistake and lost the only food he found, there was a little space in the stones and the fish had escaped into a bigger pool; once more his lack of knowledge drove him into another error; when we are in difficult situations, we have to be wise and act in an intelligent way. “Had he known of the crevice, he could have closed it with a rock at the beginning and the fish would have been his.” (London 1981, 149) Thanks to this mistake, the man learnt he must act more calmly if he wanted to survive and that is the reason why he succeeded the next time he found a larger pool with minnows; now he was led by experience. This time, he did not act nervously and managed to catch the fish with his bucket.

As the days went on, the pain in his ankle did not lessen; he was becoming weaker as the days passed by, but his love of life was the reason why he still found strength to get up and continue walking. The eating of the fish while they were still alive was just the beginning of his decline into an animal-like man; in my opinion, the culmination of this *animality* can be located when he encountered a ptarmigan nest and devoured the four-day chicks alive. From my perspective, this was one of the crudest passages of the story which depicts perfectly the naturalist theme of “the beast within”:

There were four newly hatched chicks, a day old –little specks of pulsating life no more than a mouthful; and he ate them ravenously, thrusting them alive into his mouth and crunching them like egg-shells between his teeth. The mother ptarmigan beat about him great outcry. He used his gun as a club with which to knock her over, but she dodged out of reach. (London 1981, 152)

Yet the four chicks were not enough nourishment for the man who was still dominated by hunger. Nevertheless, hunger happened to be not his only hurdle in the Klondike. He was not the only living being there, there were animals that could devour him; he encountered a bear and from that moment on he did not just live with the fear of starvation but also with the fear of being eaten alive by wild animals. The bear was not his only threat, there were wolfs as well, always there, they were like an invisible presence that could be assured by the sound of their howls. Hopefully for the man, wolfs were animals governed by instincts as well, so they would not risk their lives attacking him, because he was an unknown being to them: “They were not sufficient in numbers, and besides they were hunting the caribou, which did not battle, while this strange creature that walked erect might scratch and bite” (London 1981, 155)

The following passage that I am going to examine, along with that of the swallowing of the chicks, establishes the borderline between man and animal. The context was that of the man discovering the rest of a wolves’ hunt; there were some caribou’s bones scattered in the ground. He did not even hesitate for a second; he threw himself to the ground, and started sucking the bones:

He was squatting in the moss, a bone in his mouth, sucking at the shreds of life that still dyed it faintly pink. The sweet meaty taste, thin and elusive almost as a memory, maddened him. He closed his jaws on the bones and crunched. Sometimes it was the bone that broke, sometimes his teeth. Then he crushed the bones between rocks, pounded them to a pulp, and swallowed them. (London 1981, 156)

The following day an unexpected event gave new hope to the man, he realized he had been heading north by east, and in the horizon he now contemplated the Arctic Ocean and a whaler that symbolized his salvation. Yet, the journey to the boat would be hard, but he had enough life within him to push him forward. One of the most captivating sections of the story takes place not long after this. The man encountered a sick dying wolf and Jack London placed them at the same stage. The man was not more powerful than the wolf, they were the same, two sick creatures, starving, fighting for their lives, guided by their instincts; a battle had started, a battle for life, and it was going to be won by the stronger living being. The wolf expected the man to die first, that was his only hope to survive; both creatures were exhausted and they were waiting

for each other to die. The man dragged himself; the wolf followed him, waiting for his life to turn off. However, the man's life refused to go.

Sensation and emotion had left him. He was no longer susceptible to pain. Stomach and nerves had gone to sleep. Yet the life that was in him drove him on. He was very weary, but it refused to die. It was because it refused to die that he still ate muskeg berries and minnows, drank his hot water, and kept a wary eye on the sick wolf. (London 1981, 160)

In his way to the boat he discovered a trail made by other man, to his surprise it was Bill's, he had died devoured by wolfs. His bones were scattered as the caribou's, on the contrary, no matter how hungry he was, he did not suck the bones. In spite of being dominated by his instincts, some rationality still governed his actions; therefore reason was not completely lost. He realized that Bill had carried the gold till the moment of his death, Bill was an ambitious man. The man picked up the gold, but those days had changed him; he was no longer interested in wealth or riches. Nevertheless, he considered taking the gold just in case it would be helpful in the boat, but he dropped the bag and continued his way to the boat, refusing to die:

He knew that he could not crawl half a mile. And yet he wanted to live. It was unreasonable that he should die after all he had undergone. Fate asked him too much of him. And, dying, he declined to die. It was stark madness, perhaps, but in the very grip of Death he defied Death and refused to die. (London 1981, 161)

He kept dragging himself and he knew that apart from his completely state of exhaustion, there was another obstacle between him and the whaling vessel. The dying wolf was a problem; the wolf was watching all man's movements, waiting for a chance to attack and live. "Once, glancing back, he saw the wolf licking hungrily his bleeding trail, and he saw sharply what his own end might be –unless- unless he could get the wolf." (London 1981, 161) The man still kept certain reason within him and he was aware of his situation and the importance of making the right decision. He concocted a plan to end with the wolf's life. He would play dead and patiently wait for the wolf to attack him. He remained in a motionless state for hours until he felt his fangs softly pressing his throat; that was the man's last chance, he jumped on the wolf, put all his weight on him and choked the creature. It was natural selection, had the wolf been

stronger, he would have survived. Soon afterwards, the man was rescued by the whaling vessel; finally, he managed to survive.

In conclusion, we can say that “Love of Life” is a short story that contains all the necessary features to be deemed as a common naturalist Jack London’s arctic tale. Throughout the entire story the character is fighting for survival and suffers from starvation and severe temperatures; he finds himself alone in a hostile environment, we do not have a nurturing nature but a merciless one. According to Crews, in this short story naturalism is presented as atavism, “In response to a harsh environment, Man, too, becomes harsh. He reverts to a primordial state naturally, a victim of his heredity. His actions are determined by his heredity and environment: a typical manifestation of naturalism” (Crews 1989, 207) Jack London claims that man’s instincts are the same as they were thousands of years ago.

To finish with, I want to emphasize that “Love of Life” is the perfect example of the struggle for life; the man survived because he never surrendered, he loved life and it was this love what pushed him forward. Come hell or high water, he accomplished his goals and arrived to the whaling vessel. However, after having studied naturalism I also got another interpretation of the story. Apart from his love of life, the man survived because he was capable of adjusting to the environment. In his article, Brian Crews also made reference to this stating that the story reflected Spenser’s doctrine, “It reflects Spencer’s philosophy of the ‘struggle for existence’ and the ‘survival of the fittest’, and is, apparently, an absolute denial of individual will.” (Crews 1989, 207) Thus, the man survived because he was strong enough; had he been weaker, he would have perished there. For this reason, in this story the man’s destiny is not determined by the forces of nature; therefore, to an extent he has free will since he can control his fate. It is interesting to compare this story with “To Build a Fire”, where we can feel from the beginning that the character is condemned to die.

4.2 CONFLICT MAN VERSUS NATURE IN “TO BUILD A FIRE”

“To Build a Fire”, along with “Love of Life”, is another of Jack London’s short stories which perfectly represents the naturalist movement, and more concretely the conflict man versus nature, which will be my principal concern in this section. Similarly to “Love of Life”, it is the story of a man travelling alone through the Yukon during the winter. As well as in the previous story, we do not know the name of the protagonist, who is referred to as “the man”; by doing so, Jack London wants us to think of the man as a representative of our own species. Naturalism is ruthless, merciless and that is the reason why we have a wild, hostile nature in the story and the man is depicted as a fool, as a failure; therefore, man is at the mercy of the elements. That is why the narrative technique used by London is an omniscient narrator which describes the man not like a hero, but like a failure instead. Another of the reasons why he uses this type of narrator is that we need an omniscient narrator which knows everything about causes and consequences. After this brief introduction to the story, I want to proceed to a thorough analysis of it.

The story begins as follows, “DAY had broken cold and gray, exceedingly cold and gray, when the man turned aside from the main Yukon trail...” (265) Jack London makes emphasis on the word *day* because he wants us to think that something important is going to happen, that day is going to contain that man’s life. Jack London, as many short story writers, makes a few second expand, and that is what he does in this story. Another peculiar characteristic of London is that he creates a hypothesis in his stories; here we have a man travelling alone through a hostile environment, will he survive? He plays with the few elements that he has; he has a dog, a man, snow and a tree, and he will elaborate his story by using only those elements and by establishing very strong connections between them.

4.2.1 MAN AS A FOOL

When we are given a story that comprehends the conflict man versus nature, there are two different possible outcomes, either the man will win or nature will defeat him. Another well-known story which also deals with this conflict is Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, since it also depicts an epic struggle against nature.

As for the man in “To Build a Fire”, we just know about him that he is in an alien territory “He was a newcomer in the land, a *chechaquo*, and this was his first winter” (266) He just has a plan, to get to the camp by night, where other people will be waiting with a fire going and the supper ready. In spite of the fact that it was his first winter there and that he was alone, the man decided to take a less-travelled trail; it is obvious that his inexperience will lead to disaster. He has never been exposed to such low temperatures and he does not know the territory; however, he challenges the environment and adventures himself into the less-travelled trail because he thinks he is the cleverest of all animals. Nevertheless, in the end we will discover that he cannot control nature and he will perish because of his mistakes and because of his lack of experience.

Throughout the entire story, the low temperature is continuously emphasized. The man has never experienced such weather conditions and he is not conscious of the dangers of that climate. He had also decided not to travel on a sled because he wanted to travel light, and that was obviously another mistake because travelling on sled was the best way to move quickly there. As for the weather, he knows it is really cold, but he does not know that such climate can be the cause of his death; he thinks he can master nature. He was not aware of our condition as creatures of temperature:

He was quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances. Fifty degrees below zero meant eighty-odd degrees of frost. Such fact impressed him as being cold and uncomfortable, and that was all. It did not lead him to meditate upon his frailty as a creature of temperature, and upon man’s frailty in general, able only to limit within certain narrow limits of heat and cold; and from there on it did not lead him to the conjectural field of immortality and man’s place in the universe. (266)

4.2.2 THE ELEMENT OF THE WOLF

James Dickey, in his introduction to the book *The Call of the Wild, White Fang, and Other Stories*, pointed out that “this attitude toward the figure of the wolf—a kind of Presence, an image, a symbolic and very personal representation of a mythologized human being- is pervasive throughout all of London’s Arctic tales and is implied in many of his other fictions.” (London 1981, 7) Dickey claimed that in his Arctic tales

Jack London tied up a few elements (the Klondike, the wolf, the dog and the gold rush of 1896) and then added fate and predestination.

As in many of Jack London's narratives dealing with the Yukon, the man is not travelling alone; he has a companion, a husky dog, which is the nearest species to the wild wolf. Jack London introduces the husky dog in order to exemplify the different ways in which human beings and animals perceive nature. The husky dog is led by his instincts; he knows that is not good travelling with such temperatures, the dog did not know the exact temperature but he felt it was dangerous to travel with such cold; on the contrary, the man underestimates nature:

The dog did not know anything about thermometers. Possibly in its brain there was no sharp consciousness of a condition of very cold such as was in the man's brain. But the brute had its instinct. It experienced a vague but menacing apprehension that subdued it and made it slink along at the man's heels, and that made it question eagerly every unwonted movement of the man as if expecting him to go into the camp or to seek shelter somewhere and build a fire. (267)

The man shows absolutely no affection towards the dog. The dog saw the man as a fire and food provider, and the man used the dog as a tool. On their way to the camp, the man was aware of the dangers of encountering pools of water under the snow; he refers to them as "traps" considering that it was really dangerous to step on those pools and get his feet wet in such low temperatures because they would go numb. As he does not want to venture himself first, he constrains the dog to go ahead of him so as to examine the consistency of the ground. When the dog steps on one of those pools, his reaction is again linked to his instincts, "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. This was a matter of instinct. To permit the ice to remain would mean sore feet" (270).

Not long afterwards the man starts feeling the first signs of hypothermia, both his fingers and his toes were going numb; that was the beginning of the end. The man started to frighten and he became aware of the necessity of building a fire. In such menacing low temperatures, to build a fire means to survive, it means to go on living; if he fails on that, he will die. When the man realizes that his fingers and toes were starting to freeze, he stopped to build a fire and warm them up; when the fire was on,

the dog laid next to it and enjoyed the heat. No matter how cold it was, the man was determined to continue walking and the dog could not understand his actions:

The dog was disappointed and yearned back toward the fire. This man did not know cold. Possibly all the generations of his ancestry had been ignorant of 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. (271)

4.2.3 THE FINAL BATTLE WITH NATURE

It was when they were walking to the camp that the man's luck turned completely. He stepped on one of the pools and wet himself almost to the knees. A special urgency was born within the man; it was the urgency that controls us when we know that death is about to come, the man was getting nervous because he knew he had lost control. He had to act quickly and build a fire if he wanted to survive. He gathered some twigs and managed to start a fire; he thought he was safe and his arrogance made him once again despise the advice that the old-timer had given him, "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" (273) He even thought that the old-timers were rather womanish because they did not dare to travel by themselves. But he was alien to that land and he did not know its disguised traps. Despite the fact that the fire was on, his cheeks and nose were still freezing and his fingers were lifeless; in any case, he relied on the fire, "there was the fire, snapping and crackling and promising life with every dancing flame" (274)

However, the man did not know that he had made another mistake that would be crucial for his destiny, a mistake that brought about the disaster. He had built the fire under a tree, a tree that had accumulated snow for weeks; he had agitated the tree when taking the twigs and that had caused the fall of the snow over his fire, extinguishing it.

The man was shocked. It was as if he had just heard his own sentence of death. For a moment he sat and stared at the spot where the fire had been. Then he grew very calm. Perhaps the old-timer on Sulphur Creek was right. If he had only had a trail-mate he would have been in no danger now. The trail-mate could have built the fire. (274)

The man was going to freeze to death and he was aware of it. It was his inexperience and his arrogance what led him to his fault. Had he followed the advice of the old-timer, he would not have died. All the following man's attempts to build a fire were a disaster; it was too late, he did not have enough mobility in his fingers and could not handle the matches, "But the tremendous cold had already driven the life out of his fingers. In his effort to separate one match from the others, the whole bunch fell in the snow. He tried to pick it out of the snow, but failed" (275)

Naturalist writers held up the idea that in moments of desperation terrible thoughts can cross our minds and we become dominated by the "beast within". This notion is also reflected in "To Build a Fire", since the man, ruled by panic and desperation, thought of killing his dog:

The sight of the dog put a wild idea into his head. He remembered the tale of the man, caught in a blizzard, who killed a steer and crawled inside the carcass, and so was saved. 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. (277)

The man started calling the dog, but his voice seemed suspicious to him; his instincts warned him of the dangers that approaching the man would involve. That is why the dog turned around and started heading alone to the camp, where he would find other food and fire providers; thus, the man's final desperate attempt to survive failed and he froze to death because of his ineptitude.

In conclusion, we must say that "To Build a Fire" is the example of how nature can defeat us; in this story wilderness is the hero and man is a failure. He underestimated nature, he thought he was the best, and he died because of it. Throughout the entire story we perceive a sense of doom, and therefore, we await the fatal outcome.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, I have to say that both realism and naturalism were the movements that played a crucial role in my paper because they were necessary so as to understand the analysis of the two short stories that I chose for my paper. The complexity of the American tendencies forced me to carry out a meticulous study of the European movements first. That was the only way of understanding fully the American tendencies, especially naturalism, since it was a water-down version of the French movement. Thus, that is the reason why I paid especial attention to the French naturalist author par excellence, Émile Zola and his experimental novel. Another theory that was really important within the literary field of my paper was Darwin's theory of evolution and Spencer's believe of "the survival of the fittest". Jack London was really influenced by these ideas and in my opinion, the analysis of his arctic tales showed it very clearly.

Focusing now on the author, I can only say that the study of Jack London and the analysis of his short stories was an inspiring one. As I said in the introduction, what I most like of Jack London is that his stories seem so real because he wrote things that he lived himself; all his narrations are full with a sense of adventure. I decided to focus on Jack London's arctic tales because from my perspective, they were the perfect example of the naturalist movement. I chose for my analysis "Love of Life" and "To Build a Fire", two of his best-known Klondike tales. The most interesting part of my paper was the elaboration of the analysis. Both stories share some features of the Klondike tales, both of them have as a protagonist a man going through the arctic environment alone, fighting for survival. Another common element of both stories is the introduction of the wolf (although in "To Build a Fire" it is a husky dog), London's favorite animal, which he uses in order to show us that we are quite close to them when placed in a life or death situation, we turn into animal-like beings guided by our most basic instincts.

In addition, studying the controversy that naturalism had arisen –whether it was a pessimistic movement or an optimistic one- encouraged me to study precisely those stories. They were perfect for this paper because both of them dealt with the conflict of "man versus nature" (even though "Love of Life" focuses more on the struggle for survival, it also deals with that conflict) and their outcomes exemplified the pessimistic and the optimistic version of naturalism. In "To Build a Fire", the man is defeated by

nature and he eventually dies in the Klondike, whereas in “Love of Life”, man’s hope and love for life helps him to keep on fighting till the end, and he is saved, so he wins the battle against nature. I particularly prefer the optimistic version of the movement, and that is why my analysis of “Love of Life” is longer and more conscientious than the one regarding the other short story.

To finish with, I want to say that elaborating this paper and analyzing the two short stories by Jack London provided me with one clear idea: he is one of the best representatives of American naturalism and a must-read for anyone who is a passionate adventurer and a lover of literature.

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