

Biography of Jack London

to be used in support of lessons from To Build a Fire and Other Stories

- To Build a Fire

This Level 1 ELLSA lesson can be accessed on the internet at

http://www.rdlthai.com/ellsa_londonbio.html

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1. Biographical details

Jack London (1876-1916) Jack London's full name was John Griffith London, and he was born in San Francisco. After completing grammar school, London worked at various jobs to help support his family. He briefly enrolled in a university and took English classes, for he loved to read and write. However, he was not happy with this formal education and he soon dropped out.

In 1897 and 1898, London, like many other American and Canadian men, went north to Alaska and the Klondike region of Canada to search for gold. This was the Alaska Gold Rush. Although London never found any gold, his experience in the extreme environment of this cold part of the world gave him ideas for the stories he would write when he decided to return to California.

Upon his return to the San Francisco area, he began to write about his experiences. After winning a writing contest, he succeeded in selling some of his stories and in 1900, he published a collection of his short stories, *The Son of the Wolf*.

Like Stephen Crane, London wrote in a Naturalistic style, in which a story's actions and events are caused mainly by man's internal biological needs, or by the external forces of nature and the environment. Many of his stories, including his masterpiece *The Call of the Wild* (1903), deal with civilized man getting back in touch with his deep, animal instincts.

Among London's most important books were *People of the Abyss* (1903), written about the poor people of London, England; *The Sea Wolf* (1904), a novel based on the author's experiences as a seal hunter; *John Barleycorn* (1913), an autobiographical novel about his struggle against alcoholism; and *The Star Rover* (1915), a collection of related stories dealing with reincarnation.

London wrote more than 50 books and enjoyed enormous international popularity as an author. His exciting, often violent and brutal writing style attracted readers from all over the world and his stories and novels were translated into many different languages. Despite his success, however, alcohol and two broken marriages added to his growing unhappiness. In 1916, at the age of only 40, Jack London committed suicide.

2. Vocab checkpoint

- **grammar school (noun)** A grammar school is a high level secondary school that specializes in teaching academic subjects.
- **dropped out (phrasal verb)** To drop out is to discontinue doing something by choice, usually when it is something that is very useful or necessary. It has a negative meaning and is usually used in connection with education or society. As a noun we say drop-out, as in high school drop-out. It is also used in sports, "he dropped out of the football team". Compare this with dropped, which means a person is told to discontinue by the manager or team "he was dropped by the football team". Dropped is not usually used in educational or social contexts.
- **Gold Rush (noun)** A gold rush happens when individuals or groups of people hurry to a newly discovered region that is supposed to have a lot of gold. To Build a Fire is set during the Alaskan Gold Rush at the end of the 19th Century.
- **extreme (adjective)** Extreme refers to adverse weather, geographical and living conditions that are much worse than average.
- **experiences (noun)** Experiences as a countable noun is a collection of individual events that a person may go through during his or her life. This must be compared with the non-countable use of experience which is usually used in connection with a person's work or firsthand knowledge of a particular activity or profession.
- **in touch (adjective)** We use in-touch to describe a connection between a person and his or her feelings (or the feelings of other people), or between a person and natural forces. It is very commonly used in telephone conversations and at the end of letters, when we ask the other person to "keep in-touch".
- **instincts (noun)** Instincts are natural knowledge, the knowledge we can not learn from a book or school. A baby's first natural instinct, for example, is to cry for food and protection. Animal instincts are much stronger than human instincts. An example of this is that animals can swim without having to learn.
- **autobiographical (adjective)** An autobiography is a story of an author's life written by the author himself. A biography is the story of a person's life written by another writer.
- **alcoholism (noun)** Alcoholism is an addiction to, or dependency on, drinking alcohol. The adjective that we often use to refer to a person suffering from alcoholism is alcoholic. As a suffix -oholic or -aholic has taken on a new popular meaning that you may not find listed independently as a suffix in a dictionary, which suggests people can not stop doing something. A very common adjective that we hear a lot is workaholic, used to describe somebody who works endlessly.

- **reincarnation (noun)** Reincarnation is the concept of being born again, which is a feature of many, but not all, Buddhist and Hindu beliefs. It refers to the fact that a person will be born again in different successive lives until his or her soul is purified and released from the life cycle into Nirvana.
- **brutal (adjective)** Brutal means excessively violent or merciless. It is not usually used with animals, but is a very common way of describing extremely violent behavior in humans.
- **broken (adjective)** Broken, in this case, is used to describe a failed marriage that has ended in divorce or separation.