

8-2 Analysis Paper: Thoreau's Vision

Caitlin Kubitz

It's easy for us humans to lose sight of just how little our place is in the universe. Through the decades, we have adapted to nature so well that we appear to have forgotten that we once had to plead with it and respect its might. In "The Shipwreck," Henry David Thoreau writes about this in a way that both warns the reader and exemplifies the disregard that nature has for the human-race. Similarly, Jack London's "To Build a Fire" is an ode to the fragility of humanity at the whim of the natural world. After comparing the two pieces, it's clear that both writers are committed to speaking their minds on the vital role nature plays in our lives, yet neither one exhibits a sense of harmony. Both authors used a tone of caution rather than enlightenment, and upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that they both felt small and unworthy amid a vast and overwhelming universe.

The most notable description in "The Shipwreck" was the difference between the way Thoreau describes the dead bodies on the beach, compared to the treacherous waters of the sea. His word choice leaves us to imagine the frailness of the human body after succumbing to the wrath of nature:

One man was seeking to identify a particular body, and one undertaker or carpenter was calling to another to know in what box a certain child was put. I saw many marble feet and matted heads as the cloths were raised, and one livid, swollen, and mangled body of a drowned girl,—who probably had intended to go out to service in some American family,—to which some rags still adhered, with a string, half concealed by the flesh, about its swollen neck; the coiled-up wreck of a human hulk (Thoreau).

The tone Thoreau uses to describe the shipwreck reflects amazement at nature's power. He acknowledges the ability that nature has to be a source of life, and the bringer of death. Seeing the shipwreck reminds Thoreau and others observing the wreckage that nature doesn't stop for the safety and wellbeing of humans. It would be foolish for us to think we can convince nature to do anything other than what it's meant to do.

In "To Build a Fire," London describes a man who finds himself in a blizzard thinking that he could make the journey to a nearby village. He initially ignored and scoffed at warnings, but his cocky behavior quickly became regrettable when he saw no way out of the dangerous embrace of nature. He made choices thinking that nature would hold out on him being there, but in the end, he was humbled by the wrath of nature realizing that it has no regard for his presence.

The perspectives shared by these two authors emphasize the need to treat the natural world with reverence rather than apathy. In the end, nature tolerates us even though it could wipe us out without warning. These stories don't necessarily suggest that the victims deserved to be punished, but their demises acted as warnings when it comes to our true place in the world. Neither London nor Thoreau don't romanticize the presence of nature like most of the other authors we have visited this semester. Instead, their views offer a more realistic approach that humans should have. We are like ants compared to nature's vastness. Considering this, both writers express that we should be more careful because nature can change in an instant. When nature becomes dark and unforgiving, the way we live isn't even considered an obstacle but just another reminder to respect its boundaries and realize our place in the world.

Work Cited

“Cape Cod.” *The Project Gutenberg eBook of Cape Cod, by Henry David Thoreau*,
www.gutenberg.org/files/34392/34392-h/34392-h.htm. Accessed 20 Aug. 2023.