

HUMAN-ANIMAL RELATIONSHIP IN JACK LONDON'S 'TO BUILD A FIRE'

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Abstract

The branch of ethics has put forward a certain code of conduct that expects man to practice certain duties towards animals like having compassion for them, freeing them from pain and suffering, saving their lives and granting them their basic lives. However it is observed that practising these principles depends upon the situations in which human and animals are placed. This paper therefore aims to firstly observe what kind ethics values one show towards 'the other' in the story 'To Build a Fire' especially when the survival is at stake and secondly attempt to highlight the kind of human-animal relationship that Jack London portrays through his short story.

Before few decades and especially after the field of ethics became a branch of study, mankind has been posed with an important question regarding his ethical duties towards not only human beings but also the animals that are treated mere means to an end on the planet earth. Animals as 'the other' are exploited indiscriminately to satisfying man's unending demands in form of food, clothing, scientific research and entertainment. This has led to the wide spread extermination of the several animal species that are important to maintain the ecological imbalance. With environmental studies becoming a mainstream study, man has gradually realized the importance of animals for sustainable development. Not only the disturbance in ecology but also the horrors of the holocaust have awakened human race about the suffering of 'the other'. Just as thousand of human beings were killed in the holocaust similarly animals are killed on large scale in animal farms. The facts about the suffering of the animals, their exploitation, and the need to save them from the ill-treatment has influenced many philosophers, authors and environmental activists to write about the issues related to animals and thereby take a step towards awakening man and sensitizing him towards his duties for the animal world. To stop animal suffering and cruelty, ETHICS a branch of philosophy has played a vital role. Ethics is a body of principles which decides which course of action is proper for human beings. It imparts knowledge of how man ought to live and how he ought to treat others. Thus ethics can be seen as a branch of philosophy which is concerned with moral values that human beings are

ought to practice in their life. Ethics has framed a certain code of behavior which man has to adopt towards animals as saving animals is the major concern today.

The principles are:

- Animals are sentient creatures with intrinsic value and therefore should not be treated as non- human.
- Animals have legal status and this legal status should be recognized by the society.
- Man has to bring about a total change in his attitude towards animal world and treat animals with compassion.
- Man has to protect animals from extinction, cruelty, suffering and abuse.
- Man should refrain himself from using animals as food, clothing, research and entertainment.

Thus ethics advocates non- violence in favour of animals. It has set principles to protect the animals from suffering, pain and cruelty inflicted by human beings. Thus a moral conduct of adopting the non- violence and compassion was set by ethic to protect the animals. However these principles set are opposed by many like Descartes who believe that since human beings are superior to all other species they could be used by man the way he wants. Further he also adds that animals can be used the way man want as they do not feel pain or suffer because they are mere machines. Many others like Aristotle, Plato etc had presented the same point of view before centuries and were against giving any rights to the animals. It is felt that practising these values is depends upon many factors like time, place and situation in which human and animals are placed. Apart from presenting human- animal relationship, how practical are the ethical values towards animals to follow will be analysed through the story ‘To Build a Fire’ by Jack London.

Jack London who is known for his famous works like *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* addresses the issue of human beings ethical duties towards animals, what kind of relationship man shares with animals and the treatment animal receive by his master in his famous short story titled ‘To Build a Fire’. ‘To Build a Fire’ tells the story of a man who on one chilly morning travels through the Yukon region with his husky wolf dog to meet his friends who to are at a camp in search of gold. The temperature goes down and he finds himself being freeze up to such an extent where when he spits his saliva also freezes. But he ignores this as he is firm to accomplish his task. The man continues his journey and tries hard to build a fire to warm him up especially when he finds himself wet up with the snow but fails in his efforts in getting the fire lit up. The man soon realises that because of cold he would not be able to survive and so he urgently needs to warm up his body. He decides to kill his dog and put his hands inside the fur of the dog to be warm. But he again fails in his efforts as his hands become too numb to take out a knife, hold the dog and kill it. The man lets the dog free from his hold. He finally falls down and realises that he would not live. The man gives up, lies down on the snow and dies. The dog observes his dead master for few moments and then moves forward in the direction of the camp where he would find someone who would provide him food and shelter.

The story effectively portrays the kind of relationship human beings share with animals and vice versa. Scanning the character of man in the story it is observed that being a passionate individual he is so obstinate to accomplish his task that he is even ready to do it at the cost of others. This is seen especially when he asks the husky wolf dog to go ahead to test the ice on the trail and see whether the trail was safe to travel or not. Secondly, when man fails to light up the

fire, he decides to kill the dog and thereby warm himself by putting his hand in the skin of the dog. The man chooses to kill the dog for sake of his survival. “He would kill the dog and bury his hands in the warm body until the numbness went out of them,” (London: 1998, 8). Though the dog was the only companion the man still decides to kill the dog and this shows how self centric man can be that to accomplish his task he is ready to even take the life of his only companion.

Schweitzer, the famous philosopher who has propounded his theories in favour of animal rights stated that since every creature on earth has a will to live it is the ethical duty of human beings to respect the lives of every creature and extended their empathy towards animals. It is the ethical duty of human beings to avoid themselves from harming another creature and do as much good as possible to them. But what is observant of ‘To Build a Fire’ is that when man faces death he has no time to think about his ethical duties towards animals. The man ignores his responsibilities towards keeping the animal alive as his survival is at stake. Thus the man is putting his life before dog’s life and considers his life to be more important than ‘the other’. Thus in sum when man faces life or death situation he puts himself first rather than saving ‘the other’ without considering any set ethics or principles that advocate saving the life of the animal.

It is also striking to study the behaviour of the dog towards his master. It is seen that the dog remains a good companion to his master while travelling across Yukon. He is also seen warning his master about the unfavourable conditions that they would face ahead while travelling but his master is obstinate enough not to pay any heed to his warnings. The instincts in the dog make him aware about the hardships ahead because of the falling temperature. Towards the end of the story when the man dies in the snow, the dogs stays with the man for a while but when he realises the man is dead he moves ahead and abandons his dead master for sake of his own survival. “Then it turned and trotted up the trail in the direction of the camp it knew...” (ibid., 15). Thus what is observed is that for both man and animal survival is important. When it’s the question of survival of one’s own being versus the consideration of the other it is always former that wins over the latter. Jack London seems to put a reality forward that when survival is at stake no ethics, values or principles matter.

Another important aspect that gets highlighted in ‘To Build a Fire’ is the supremacy of nature and its power to defeat mankind. The story having as a backdrop the Yukon region where temperature falls down at a fast rate freezing everything on the surface shows how powerful nature is and how insignificant man is in front of this nature. Man thinks he is powerful enough to conquer nature but Jack London presents that no power or will to conquer nature can win over the forces of nature.

To surmise it can be said that Jack London firstly has effectively shed light on human-animal relationship. On one hand he presents a relationship between man and animal where both are dependent on one another and on the other especially towards the end of the story strikingly points out the will to save one’s own life rules over the consideration of the other’s life. Secondly he also sets a message for his readers that nature can never be conquered and if man tries to win over it he has to face adverse consequences like the one we face today in form of environmental crisis.

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