**Student Example of Analysis Essay**

**Assignment:** Choose one of the works of realism or naturalism and write an essay on it. The essay should examine the work in the context of one of genres.

**“To Build A Fire” and Naturalism**

In the turn of the twentieth century a new method of literary composition appeared called naturalism. Like realism, this new method was in a large part a reaction against the stories of romanticism in which heroism, morals, chivalry and love played an important role. Naturalist writers such as the French novelist Emile Zola, and the American writers Stephen Crane and Bret Harte attempted to be scientifically objective in their writing and eschew moralizing. One of the most renowned writers of naturalism was Jack London, author of *Call of The Wild* and *White Fang*. In one of his most popular short stories “To Build a Fire,” London uses many characteristics of the stories of naturalism.

The style of “To Build a Fire” is restrainedly objective and scientific. Throughout the story the narrator remains removed and objective in his description of the man and the dog; in fact, he never mentions the man's name. However, scrupulous details of their physical traits are given. The man is described as an outsider of the Yukon area, specifically as “a newcomer in the land, a *chechaquo*, and this was his first winter.” Details also abound regarding the man's physical appearance, such as his snow covered beard and the amber colored frost covering from the chewing tobacco covering the man's chin. The man's vulnerability to the cold is also repeatedly mentioned. In the beginning of the story, for instance, the clothing of the man is described: the ear-flaps, the warm coat and the moccasins. The man regrets that he had not made a nose strap to protect the one exposed part of his body. Also, throughout the story there are detailed descriptions of how the frost
is penetrating the man’s body. The narrator says, “He was losing in his battle with the frost. It was creeping into his body from all sides.” London uses all these seemingly meaningless details to make the story like a science experiment. He seems to describe the two characters not as a man and a dog but as two objects.

In “To Build a Fire,” the environment in which the characters are placed plays an important role. Like many other stories of naturalism, “To Build a Fire” contains a harsh environment. Precise descriptions of the temperature are given: it is exactly seventy-five degrees below zero. This objective number is supported by observable scientific phenomenon: the man’s spittle crackles before it touches the ground: “He spat again. And again, in the air, before it could fall to the snow, the spittle crackled. He knew that at fifty below spittle crackled on the snow, but this spittle had crackled in the air.” In addition to objective details regarding the cold are details regarding the light: the man travels in a semidarkness, as the sun hardly rises in the depth of a northern winter. The bleakness of the environment is capped by a uniformly white landscape broken up only by a few scattered trees. In sum, the arctic temperature, lighting and landscape of “To Build a Fire” serve as a controlled laboratory environment in which the dog is able to survive, but the man is doomed to die.

“To Build a Fire” is also highly deterministic as the characters do not have any control over their fate. Unlike stories of Romanticism in which character and morals allow the protagonist to overcome his obstacles and change his fate, in Jack London’s story the protagonist’s fate is determined completely by his environment and his physical characteristics. The man in the story has all three of these points against him. He is an
outsider of the region, he does not have the fur the dog has and he is not willing to take the advice of the old timer. On the other hand, the dog is perfectly fit for the environment. The dog is described as “a big native husky, the proper wolf-dog, gray-coated and without any visible or temperamental difference from its brother, the wild wolf.” The dog is the man’s foil. The man has to bundle warmly, while the dog has his warm natural coat; the dog has instincts while the man does not. Throughout the story the man is envious of the dog’s natural coat. Jack London writes, “And the man, as he beat and threshed with his arms and hands, felt a great surge of envy as he regarded the creature that was warm and secure in its natural covering.” In the end, the dog survives, while the man dies because he is not fit for the harsh Yukon environment.

In a large part, the basis for the stories of naturalism came from the new scientific theories coming from men such as Darwin, Spencer and Huxley. All of Jack London’s stories such as *Call of The Wild*, *White Fang*, and “To Build a Fire” emphasize the idea behind Spencer’s idea of the “survival of the fittest.” In fact London himself said, “I endeavored to make my stories in line with the facts of evolution; I hewed them to the mark set by scientific research, and awoke, one day, to find myself bundled neck and crop into the camp of a nature-faker.”