Analyzing “To Build a Fire”

Overview: This lesson allows students to read and analyze portions of Jack London’s “To Build a Fire” as contained in the textbook. The beginning of the class will focus on whole group instruction, and then students will work in groups to analyze specific sections. Groups should be based on mixed-ability grouping with a strong reader for each group. Teachers can differentiate this activity by working with groups as needed.

S:

ELACC11-12RL1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

ELACC11-12RL3: Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

ELACC11-12RL6: Analyze a case in which grasping point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

E: How does setting contribute to conflict?

A: Journal writing; continue discussion about cold...which students went out last Tuesday...how cold was it; how long did anyone stay out; what was necessary for your time outside; recommendations; etc.
In this story, it is 75 degrees below 0.

Go over terms: Setting, conflict, internal, external, Naturalism

T: Read pages 597-598 of “To Build a Fire” out loud; discuss

Assign groups of students to read 5 sections of the selection. They will read, answer questions, complete a summary and cite evidence related to how the setting contributes to the conflict(s).

Groups will present summary and evidence.

S: Answer on a Post-it Note or note card: What is one way the setting contributes to the conflict?

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Setting: Time and place

Conflict: the struggle between opposing forces

- Internal: Conflict which occurs within the mind of a character
- External: Conflict which occurs between a character and society, nature, another person, God, or fate

Naturalism: Literary movement that views people as helpless victims of unchangeable natural laws; people are at the mercy of a cold and uncaring universe; nature wins.

Assignment: Each group will read assigned pages from the story. While you read, you need to answer the questions provided to develop an objective summary of the text. In addition, you need to cite evidence (details from the text) that demonstrates how the setting contributes to the conflict(s) of the story.

Pages 597-598 (Read and discuss together)

- What time of day is it? 9:00 in the morning
- Where is the man and how is the weather? He is in the Yukon wilderness. It is clear but there is no sun; cold and gray, exceedingly cold and gray
- Has the man experienced this before? No, he is a “newcomer in the land.”
- What happens when the man spits and why is this significant? The spittle crackles in the air, so he knows it is even colder than 50 below zero.
- When does he plan to be at the camp? 6:00 that night
- What does he carry with him? Only his lunch
- What is the difference in how the man and dog react to the cold? The man is “surprised at the cold, but thinks little about it. The dog on the other hand, is “depressed by the tremendous cold” and knows it is not the time for traveling.
- What does the dog have that the man does not? Instinct
- What is the actual temperature? 75 below zero
- Provide at least 3 specific references to the setting.
  - “The Yukon lay a mile wide and hidden under three feet of ice. On top of this ice were as many feet of snow.”
  - “But all this—the mysterious, far-reaching hairline trail, the absence of sun from the sky, the tremendous cold, and the strangeness and weirdness of it all—made no impression on the man.”
  - “Fifty degrees below zero meant eighty-odd degrees of frost. Such fact impressed him as being cold and uncomfortable, and that was all.”

- Summary:
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Assignment:

Each group will read assigned pages from the story. While you read, you need to answer the questions provided to develop an objective summary of the text. In addition, you need to cite evidence (details from the text) that demonstrates how the setting contributes to the conflict(s) of the story.

Reader:

Recorder:

Summary:

Speaker:

Group 1: page 599-601

Begin reading: “He held on through the level stretch of woods....”

End reading: “...beat the hand savagely across his chest.”

- Describe the man’s thoughts.
- What time of day is it?
- How fast is the man traveling?
- What does the man think about frosted cheeks? How is this significant?
- Why does the man move back abruptly when he is walking along the creek?
- Why does the man want to avoid getting his feet wet?
- Why does the man make the dog go in front at one point? What happens? How does the dog react?
- What conflict is most evident?
- Provide at least 3 specific references to the setting.

Summary:
Each group will read assigned pages from the story. While you read, you need to answer the questions provided to develop an objective summary of the text. In addition, you need to cite evidence (details from the text) that demonstrates how the setting contributes to the conflict(s) of the story.

Begin reading: “At twelve o’clock the day was at its brightest.....”

End reading: ....at the man’s heels and followed after.”

- What time of day is it?
- Why does the man stop?
- What has he forgotten to do?
- Explain why the dog is disappointed when they move forward. What is the difference between the dog and the man?
- What is the connection between the dog and the man?
- Provide at least 3 specific references to the setting.

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Group 3: page 603-605

Each group will read assigned pages from the story. While you read, you need to answer the questions provided to develop an objective summary of the text. In addition, you need to cite evidence (details from the text) that demonstrates how the setting contributes to the conflict(s) of the story.

Begin reading: “The man took a chew of tobacco and proceeded to start....”

End reading: “...before the second fire was ready.”

- What happens to the man in the first paragraph?
- Why is the man angry?
- Why does he have to build a fire? Explain why it is so important to succeed.
- How does the man feel about his fire?
- What happens to the fire? How is it the man’s fault or mistake?
- What is the primary conflict in this section?
- Provide at least 3 specific references to the setting.

Summary:
Group 4: page 605-607

Reader:

Recorder:

Summary:

Speaker:

Each group will read assigned pages from the story. While you read, you need to answer the questions provided to develop an objective summary of the text. In addition, you need to cite evidence (details from the text) that demonstrates how the setting contributes to the conflict(s) of the story.

Begin reading: “Such were his thoughts…”

End reading: “animal sidled mincingly away.”

NOTE: The man has just built a fire to warm up after he got his feet wet, but the fire went out.

- Describe the process the man goes through to build the fire.
- Why does the man struggle with the matches?
- What was the advice he had been given from the old-timer at Sulphur Creek? What does he realize about this advice?
- What happens when the man lights all 70 matches?
- What causes the fire to go out?
- What idea does the man have about the dog?
- Provide at least 3 specific references to the setting.

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Group 5: 607-610

Reader:

Recorder:

Summary:

Speaker:

Each group will read assigned pages from the story. While you read, you need to answer the questions provided to develop an objective summary of the text. In addition, you need to cite evidence (details from the text) that demonstrates how the setting contributes to the conflict(s) of the story.

Begin reading: “The sight of the dog put a wild idea into his head....”

End reading: End of story

- What idea does the man have about the dog?
- How does the dog react to the man in the first paragraph?
- When the man stands up and calls the dog it obeys. What does the man attempt to do?
- Why is the man unable to kill the dog?
- What realization does the man have that leads to his running on the trail?
- What is the flaw in the man’s plan to run all of the way to the camp?
- After he runs and falls for a second time, what realization does the man have?
- What happens to the man?
- What does the dog do at the end of the story?
- Provide at least 3 specific references to the setting.

Summary: