

Character and Medium: Jack London's Narrative and *The Grey* (a Film by John Carnahan)

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Abstract

Both literature and cinema tell stories. Nevertheless, stories are told differently on the page than on the screen. This article intends to explain and put into practice an approach to the comparative analysis of literary and cinematic narrative texts; such approach will focus on character and characterization. The category of character will serve as a guiding notion for the analysis through an exploration of the various ways in which one film and three short stories shape their major characters. The film is *The Grey* (2011), written and directed by John Carnahan, and the stories are "In a Far Country," "To Build a Fire," and "The Law of Life," all authored by Jack London and evoked by the film. The intention here is not to establish or explain the extent to which the film may or may not be considered an adaptation of London's stories. This is rather an attempt to compare the particular ways in which both media narrate, based on an observation of the different matters of expression that the cinematic and the literary texts use to give life to the characters and their attitudes and realities.

Key words: comparative literature, character, film, narrative

Resumen

Tanto la literatura como el cine cuentan historias. No obstante, estas historias se cuentan de manera diferente en la pantalla o en el papel. Este artículo pretende explicar y poner en práctica una estrategia de análisis

comparativo de textos narrativos literarios y cinemáticos, la cual se enfoca en los personajes y su caracterización. La categoría del personaje servirá como guía para el análisis, a través de una exploración de varias maneras en las que una película y tres cuentos dan forma a sus personajes principales. La película es *The Grey* (2011), escrita y dirigida por John Carnahan, y las historias, “In a Far Country”, “To Build a Fire” y “The Law of Life”, todas de la autoría de Jack London y evocadas por el film. La intención no es establecer o explicar hasta qué punto la película puede o no puede considerarse una adaptación de los cuentos de London. Más bien, se trata de comparar las maneras particulares en las que ambos medios narran, con base en una observación de las diferentes materias de expresión que los textos fílmicos y literarios utilizan para dar vida a los personajes y a sus actitudes y realidades.

Palabras claves: literatura comparada, personaje, cine, narrativa

Character

The centrality of character as a locus for analysis in comparative literature has been strongly established. J. T. Shaw argues, for example, that the “influence” of a (literary) text upon another must be expressed through the means of a specific form, like character, in order to be “meaningful” (65). Although this may also be true for other literary components like imagery, style, and theme, the truth is that the category of character allows for a fuller structural and discursive experience since it amalgamates form and content in a way that other literary elements do not. Character has a “unifying power,” says Gregory Currie (64); it helps readers (and viewers) “make coherent sense of a pattern of complex motivation” (64) and “[sustains] discourse about human interactions” upon the basis of plot (69). Narrative, apparently, depends on character to signify.

According to Currie, “character and narrative are made for each other” (61, 65). The latter becomes real in terms of

the former, and the effectivity of action, which is so central to any narrative text, is dependent upon the existence of character. Newton P. Stallknecht provides a more philosophical take on the matter when he claims that it is in the “characterizations” and “images of human nature” where ideas lie (118). Without these images, he maintains, there is no literature. This position is particularly relevant for a definition of literature as discourse, and for an appreciation of narrative as something more than just action. “Character,” says Currie, “is manifest not only in behavior, but in mental states such as desire and, especially, intention” (62). It is part of human nature, as it is part of characters in narrative, to act in accordance with thoughts and ideas.

However, ideas affect not only characters or authors but also readers and viewers of narrative texts. A major mechanism through which this occurs is sympathy. Giovannelli explains, “Narratives, thanks to their capacity of presenting us, so to speak, ‘from within,’ with situations and characters’ mental states in their progression through

time, are especially apt to elicit rich and articulate sympathetic responses" (92), hence the power of character and characterization to influence not only narrative but also the *receivers* of narrative.

A certain subordination of narrative and plot under the power and intention of character seems to endorse character-focused criticism in comparative analyses. Currie perceives narrative as a medium for the development of the persona in reaction to his or her environment (63). He goes as far as to claim that "narrative is an artifact, intentionally crafted to be the representation [of character's behavior]" (63). This opinion, as absolute as it may sound, has an enormous influence on how two different narrative texts may be viewed in mutual comparison. Nevertheless, a more moderate take on the same idea may prove just as helpful. Character and plot, according to Julian Murphet, "are ceaselessly reabsorbed into one another in the phenomenology of reading" (106). He maintains that "determinations of historicity, of form, and of media" have of late stressed the differences and not the convergences between character and narrative, but ultimately, "these cannot be approached separately, but must be faced squarely in their knotted convolution" (106). Without undermining the critical value of other elements of narrative, Murphet's take sustains the universal centrality of character as a focus of attention in comparative criticism.

In particular, comparative analyses of narrative texts across artistic genres requires a focus which can assist the critic in organizing and communicating his or her attempts at interpretation. Murphet admits that the category of character is usually explained "as the incitement to subjective commitments...

but only in relation to the specific formal and medial conjunctures of a given textual moment" (107). In this sense, both the experience of reading and that of watching a film involve the exposure to more than one element susceptible to interpretation; however, sympathy towards and identification with the narrative persona make it central to the analysis, even when other categories are also included. Finally, as for the comparative analysis of different medial contexts of narrative creation, character is particularly useful since it combines form, subjectivity, and discourse around graspable targets for discussion.

Medium

For the comparative analysis of literature and film, one major theoretical notion determines everything and anything of that which can be done, and it is *medium specificity*. This is a critical approach that Robert Stam explains as based on the assumption that "each art form has uniquely particular norms and capabilities of expression" (11-12). Thus, film, for example, can do things that a short story or novel cannot and vice versa. There is, therefore, a "cinematic specificity" that may be explored in terms of historical, technological, or linguistic particularities, among others (13). In the case of literature, on the other hand, the specific written medium both constrains and releases the power of creation and the possibilities for interpretation in ways unknown to film. "It is precisely through this specificity, however, that the semantic comparisons available between the two arts are most accurately arrived at" (Montenegro 134). Here, a linguistic approach is

preferred inasmuch as it reveals more about the formal and discursive relationships between one artistic genre and the other.

Film expresses itself mainly through the visual image in movement while literature relies solely on the written word. In this simple assertion lies the construal of medium specificity, which assumes that each art form has at its disposal its own particular *matter of expression*. Stam differentiates between film and literature in the following way:

Literary language... is the set of messages whose matter of expression is writing; cinematic language is the set of messages whose matter of expression consists of five tracks or channels: moving photographic image, recorded phonetic sound, recorded noises, recorded musical sound, and writing (credits, intertitles, written materials in the shot). (112)

The multiplicity of expressive possibilities that the cinematic genre is able to entertain makes it a more resourceful medium in comparison to literature. On the other hand, the prestige and historical success of the written narrative still place it above the other in terms of presence and cultural significance. For the purposes of most comparative analyses of literary and cinematic narratives, however, such hierarchical distinctions are beside the point. "A movie," claims John Raskin, for instance, "ought to adhere to its own modes of storytelling, visual rhetoric, and rhythm and not genuflect before a literary text" (200). Notwithstanding, a deep awareness of the matters of expression available to each medium is necessary, particularly

around the construction of narrative elements or categories.

In the specific case of character and characterization, each genre makes use of its own resources to create the heroes and heroines that will engage audiences. In literary narratives, characters are created through "1) the explicit presentation by the author of the characters, 2) the presentation of the character in action, and 3) the representation from within a character" (Holman and Harmon, qtd. in Meyers and Pacheco 47), among other more specific methods like naming and dialogue. In film, other variables, like the acting style and the cinematography or *mise en scène*, not only interfere with a previous literary version of the character but may also, like Corrigan says, "add to the meaning of the movie" (81). The description of a literary character's appearance, for instance, may rely on explicit adjectives provided by the narrator or other characters, which ultimately render him or her as close to a real person as the reader's imagination allows. In a movie, however, the physicality of a character is unavoidably determined by that of the actor or actress who portrays him or her. For better or for worse, movie characters are "a product of certain techniques and film materials" and often "a product of the *star system* that commercially promotes the images and personalities of certain actors" (81). In any event, a character-focused comparative analysis of a cinematic and a literary text must consider the possibilities that all matters of expression offer to the process of characterization.

Jack London's Characters and *The Grey*

John Ottway (Liam Neeson) is a sharpshooter whose job is to protect an oil-drilling team from wolf attacks. Old Koskoosh is the blind father of an Eskimo chief who is left behind to die by his tribe. Cuthfert and Weatherbee are two very opposite men who embark on an impossible journey for which they are utterly unprepared. The man in "To Build a Fire" is given no name, but his mathematical way of thinking make him as infamous as his inability to accept his doom. What do all these characters have in common? What is it about the way in which they are presented that ultimately brings them together? How come do their varying personalities, behaviors, experiences, and motivations all point to similar directions? These are some of the questions that this comparative analysis of Joe Carnahan's film *The Grey* and three of Jack London's most famous stories intends to answer. In order to do so, five topics will be addressed consecutively: the role of the senses in characterization, the representation of leadership and leader characters, the link between the past and the present in the character's mind, the illustration of the pragmatic man, and finally, the naturalistic paradox of human existence.

One of the most common and effective methods of literary characterization is the representation of emotions and individual perceptions from within the character. Through this method, the reader is given access to what the character feels and thinks, but also to what he or she sees, smells, hears, tastes or feels with his or her skin. In film, it is both through the character's

reactions and through what the camera or the microphones communicate or don't communicate that the viewer can understand what the persona is perceiving through his or her senses. In *The Grey*, for example, there are several cases in which the sound of other characters and the environment is muted in order to show the protagonist's inattention to them. Very early in the film, Ottway decides not to hear what goes around him in the bar but closes off and lets his mind wander to the memories of his late wife. Soon after, he does the same on the airplane, when he focuses on the letter that he has written for her. The opposite effect of hearing something for the first time or very loudly is likewise communicated by the reactions of the characters, aided by the movements of the camera. This is the case of the scene in which the men are desperately trying to build a fire as the pack of wolves closes around them in the middle of the night. All of a sudden, the alpha male growls loudly, and everyone is paralyzed by the sound, both wolves and men.

Old Koskoosh, the protagonist of London's "The Law of Life," also reacts to sounds in a particularly relevant way. Given that he is blind, much emphasis is placed on what he hears or doesn't hear. Actually, the whole story is narrated from the point of view of Koskoosh's experiences as he gets closer and closer to his death and listens to what happens around him. "He listened," says the narrator, "who would listen no more" (par. 3). After he is left completely alone, "he listen[s] to the silence" (par. 19). "He strain[s] his ears... Not a stir, nothing" (par. 20); then suddenly, "Hark! What was that?" (par. 20). Here the narrator recedes into

the background and Koskoosh's sense of hearing takes over: "The familiar, long-drawn howl broke the void, and it was close at hand" (par. 20). Just like Ottway and the others, Koskoosh must face the terrible sounds of the wolves.

However, not only his hearing but also his sight and his sense of touch play a very important role in describing the protagonist's experiences and emotions. Many times is it mentioned that "he sees" images from his past, and as he hears the horrible "sniffs turned to snarls" at the end of his life (par. 21), he also *sees* his end as he saw a wild moose's in his youth: "He saw the flashing forms of gray, the gleaming eyes, the lolling tongues, the slavered fangs. And he saw the inexorable circle close in till it became a dark point in the midst of the stamped snow" (par. 20). Right after this, the sense of touch takes over as Koskoosh feels "a cold muzzle thrust against his cheek" (par. 21). The image is comparable to that of Talget's death in *The Grey*, when he feels as his little girl's hair brushing against his face what is really the wolves' fur as they carry him away.

The sense of touch is exceptionally relevant both in Carnahan's film and in London's stories, especially on account of the various depictions of the extreme cold weather to which the characters are subjected. Ottway and the other men experience the terrible Alaskan cold from beginning to end, but it is during the monstrous blizzard that takes Burke's life that they most awfully suffer it. The men's beards and faces are covered with frost as they shiver uncontrollably, and the expression on their faces communicates acute pain and suffering. In "To Build a Fire," the cold is actually another character,

the first to be introduced by the narrator, and it is usually described in very physical terms. The extremely low temperature is registered and announced repeatedly, but each time, the protagonist's reaction is mechanical, practical, too unfeeling: "Fifty degrees below zero was to him just precisely fifty degrees below zero" (3). Even when he feels and notices that his cheeks and nose have succumbed to the frost, the only emotion that he experiences is "regret" for not having worn a nose-strap: "But it didn't matter much after all. What were frosted cheeks? A bit painful, that was all" (7). Later in the story, the cold takes away the very sense of touch from his fingers (22), and still he reacts with some sort of controlled despair, even after he realizes that there is no escaping death: "Freezing is not so bad as people thought. There were lots worse ways to die" (32). The various reactions of characters to the cold, as they are represented in both the literary and the cinematic media, help construct their personae.

Cuthfert and Weatherbee, in "In a Far Country," also experience the cold. Their situation is so desperate that even though "their cheeks and noses... [have] turned black" and "their frozen toes [have] begun to drop away at the first and second joints," they continue to crawl to the woods in search for wood for the fire box (par. 69). However, it is what they see and hear, and sometimes what they don't, what ultimately determines their behavior when the end comes. They must face "the Fear of the North," which, the narrator says, is "the joint child of the Great Cold and the Great Silence" (par. 48) and affects the protagonists differently, "according to their natures" (par. 48). Weatherbee starts to see dead people, first

in his dreams and later also when he is awake; they finally drive him to attack Cuthfert (par. 91). For the latter, however, not what he sees but what he doesn't see threatens him with madness. The wind-vane that is fixed to the cabin's roof refuses to move at all, and Cuthfert longs to see it turn. He grows more and more anxious about it: "The air frighten[s] him with its unearthly calm" (par. 50), until his imagination runs riot and he murders Weatherbee. Such hallucinations in the North may be rationally explained as caused by hypoxia, or at least that is what Henrick says, in *The Grey*, when Burke wakes up suddenly asking for his lost sister. Still, in the movie, "the Fear of the North" has a much more tangible object, the wolves.

Wolves are gregarious animals. They live as part of a pack and work as a team to secure food and hold their ground. They also follow a leader, the alpha, and if any other wolf challenges him, he reasserts his dominance, and the defeated party usually becomes an outcast. All of this is clear to Ottway, who matter-of-factly explains it to his own pack, the men who follow him. Ottway's leadership attitudes seem to come to him effortlessly, if only on account of the emergency that he and the other men are facing. He quickly gathers himself and grasps the magnitude of their situation after the plane crashes. Soon enough, he is helping others, giving instructions, and even gently ushering one man into his inevitable death. He doesn't seem to share in the despair that neutralizes the others' actions and thoughts, and also, he has knowledge; he is the wolf expert, who can explain what happens and maintain, until the very end, a level-headed demeanor in

the mist of tragedy. However, his leadership does not go unchallenged. "When did you become an expert?" Diaz questions him when he lectures on wolves and their habits. "Nobody nominated you shit, by the way," he continues when they're about to leave the remains of the plane. Diaz's anger and rebellion escalate until he challenges Ottway to a fight, to which the latter responds with greater skill and strength of character. At that point, Diaz faces not only the alpha of his group but also the alpha wolf, which appears out of nowhere to confront him directly. Ottway takes advantage of the opportunity to present him with an ultimatum: "No más," and Diaz has no option but to apologize and come to terms with his leader and with his own fears.

Some of these same leadership attitudes are present in Jacques Baptiste, one of the major characters in London's "In a Far Country," although, unlike Ottway, he fails to subdue two of his followers' unruly conducts, namely Cuthfert's and Weatherbee's. Baptiste is their half-Indian guide, the expert on all matters pertaining their improbable journey. He values hard work and responsibility, which is why he "sneer[s] openly and damn[s] [the protagonists] from morning till night" on account of their laziness and constant complaining (par. 9). He even goes as far as "manhandl[ing]" both of them, "the Incapables," as he calls them, when they attempt mutiny (par. 12), much in the same way as Ottway subdues Diaz in *The Grey*. He is also true to his word. He alone remains as a knowledgeable expeditioner after "the common dread of the Unknown Lands" has driven all others away (par. 10): "Had he not sworn to travel even to the never-opening ice?"

(par. 11). In spite of the obnoxious, infuriating attitudes of the Incapables, Baptiste still reacts with a speck of regret when they decide to stay behind in the cabin. "The Frenchman in Baptiste shrugged his shoulders, but the Indian in him was silent. Nevertheless, it was an eloquent shrug, pregnant with prophecy" (par. 31). Ottway also resorts to silence when Diaz, his own "Incapable," finally decides to sit down and wait for his death, even in spite of Henrick's insistence to persuade him of the opposite.

In "The Law of Life," he who is left behind was also the leader once. Old Koskoosh used to be the chief before his son took over, and "he remembered how he had abandoned his own father on an upper reach of the Klondike one winter" (par. 11), all for the good and the survival of the tribe. In his childhood, before becoming "a leader of men and a head of councilors" himself (par. 18), Koskoosh learned what it meant for a member of the group to fall behind on account of his old age and weakness. He and his friend Zing-ha once followed the tracks of a moose. The latter had explained, "An old one who cannot keep with the herd. The wolves have cut him out from his brothers, and they will never leave him" (par. 14). The way of his tribe, however, was different; they did abandon the old and the weak. In his present situation, Koskoosh finds himself a leader without followers. He has obeyed the law of life; he has accomplished his task, and now he is ready to face his end with dignity and for the sake of his absent tribe. Similarly, Ottway is finally left alone, forsaken by God Himself. He has sacrificed everything and everyone in the name of survival, and in the end, he looks at death, "the law

of life," in the eye of the alpha wolf, only "to perpetuate" the memory of his men, which is "the task of life" (par. 11). Like Koskoosh's, this is Ottway's ultimate act as a leader.

No salient leader figure is presented in "To Build a Fire," but the only possible connection that the protagonist establishes with the concept of leadership or, more accurately, with some sense of direction and guidance, is that which he admits is in his recent past, in his memory of the old man from Sulphur Creek. The narrator's constant references to this minor character occur in relation to the protagonist's memories, his only link with the past, which notwithstanding end up shaping and illuminating his present situation. "It certainly was cold, was his thought. That man from Sulphur Creek had spoken the truth when telling how cold it sometimes got in the country. And he had laughed at him at the time!" (12). The protagonist first remembers his conversation with the old-timer as a parallel annotation to his present thoughts, but little by little, the truth in his message acquires more significance. He starts to value his advice (16), especially his "law that no man must travel alone in the Klondike after fifty below" (18), and later his appreciation turns into a certainty of the truth in the old man's words. Finally, when the protagonist faces the end, the old-timer materializes in front of him: "[The traveller] could see him quite clearly, warm and comfortable, and smoking a pipe" (32-33). What was first a mere thought is now made real through the actual words of the protagonist, who tells the imaginary man, "You were right, old hoss; you were right" (33). The only trace of evolution in the story's main character, if any,

appears in the shape of his memory of the old man.

Ottway's memories are also what keep him true to his character and help explain at least some of his behaviors, yet in the film, the ways in which the past may be conjured are much more tangible and varied. Like in the case of the protagonist in "To Build a Fire," Ottway's past explains much about his present disposition, and his conscious realization of it helps him advance towards the end. In the very last scene of the movie, Ottway once again recites his father's poem: "Once more into the fray... / Into the last good fight I'll ever know. / Live and die on this day... / Live and die on this day..." A flashback sequence that has been recurrent since about half-way through the film interrupts the climax, but this time not only his father and himself as a child are visible but also the written poem in full, coming dramatically into focus as the little boy's face contemplates it. Ottway's final battle gains momentum, and his character comes most clearly into view, not only because of the words of the poem but also because of his vivid memory, which is presented to the viewer just at the right moment.

Koskoosh is also shaped as a character on account of his memories. Since, according to the narrator, his ability for abstract thought is so limited (par. 11), it is only natural to expect his characterization to be achieved by way of the vivid memories of his childhood and youth. All throughout the story, he goes back and forth between his present reality and his recollections of the past. "Koskoosh placed another stick on the fire," the reader is told, "and harked back deeper into the past" (par. 12). At moments like this, a flashback takes

over the narration, and something more is learned about the protagonist's personality, behavior, and motivations. Koskoosh's strong belief that "all men must die" and that death is "easy," something to be expected (par. 10), for instance, is most probably rooted in the memory of all those whom he has lost, especially Zing-ha, his childhood friend, "who later became the craftiest of hunters, and who, in the end, fell through an air-hall of the Yukon" (par. 13). He also remembers how even a wolf died as the moose that its pack was hunting, and whose trace he and Zing-ha were following, trampled on it until only "a few bones... bore witness" (par. 15). Koskoosh's practice at reminiscing accounts not only for the familiarity with which he awaits death but also for how perfectly he justifies those who have left him behind. He himself left his father once (par. 11), and how can he blame Sit-cum-to-da, his granddaughter, for not remembering to gather more wood for his fire? She was in love and therefore careless about her elders, but "had he not done likewise in his own quick youth?" (par. 19). In the end, Koskoosh finds solace in his memories and prefers to cling to them than to life itself.

In *The Grey*, the protagonist also refuses to cling to life at first, and like the old man in "The Law of Life," his memories greatly influence his behavior, although in quite different ways. In the very first scene of the film, and through a series of flashbacks, Ottway gloomily remembers his wife while he drinks at a bar. "There's not a second that goes by when I'm not thinking of you in some way," the viewer hears him say as he speaks to her in his mind. A lighted room appears, and the couple is seen caressing one another's hands as

they lie face to face in bed. Suddenly, the music becomes more ominous, and Ottway says, "You left me, and I can't get you back." Another sequence shows the protagonist writing the letter that he has just been heard reading. From his words, it seems obvious that he blames himself for whatever has happened to him and his wife. "I've stopped doing this world any real good," he says, which explains why he is next seen out in the cold with the cannon of his rifle in his mouth. Another quick memory is presented; it is that of his father and himself as a little boy. This is the first time he recites the poem quoted above, and it seems as it is this memory that prevents him from committing suicide.

The image of Ottway's wife appears repeatedly all throughout the film, mainly as a memory but also in dreams. In a couple of cases, she speaks. She says, "Don't be afraid," specifically soon before Hernandez's and right after Burke's death. When Ottway last reminisces about her, only a few minutes before the end, a rationale for her absence is finally offered. "Don't be afraid," she says once more, and to a very low piano note, the camera closes up on an IV bag drip chamber: disease has taken her. Her memory finally gives Ottway the strength to fight the alpha wolf, as does the memory of his father and his poem. For the protagonist, remembering the dead seems to be a priority, almost an obsession, all throughout the film. Not only does he carry along his letter to his wife, together with constant visions of her, but he also insists on collecting the wallets of every man and woman who has fallen victim to either the plane crash or the wolves. At first, he does it for a very practical reason: identification, but later, and right until the very

last moment, he wants to make sure that everyone is remembered. His preoccupation with remembering portrays him as a much deeper character than he seems at first.

No indication of depth in Ottway's character, however, comes without a price. He is first and foremost a pragmatic man who must overcome very tangible obstacles. Such pragmatism is also a common topic in London's stories, particularly in "To Build a Fire" but also in "In a Far Country." The latter opens with a very realistic assertion: "When a man journeys into a far country, he must be prepared to forget many of the things he has learned, and to acquire such customs as are inherent with existence in the new land" (par. 1). Thereafter, the narrative proves, through the characterization of the two protagonists, the fatal consequences of disregarding this knowledge. Both Cuthfert and Weatherbee fail to adjust to life in the inhospitable North; they cling to their own ways and stupidly disobey the laws of survival. As a result, they succumb to their own lack of pragmatism. For Weatherbee, a blind search for gold, and for Cuthfert, "an abnormal development of sentimentality" (par. 5) ultimately signify perdition. In spite of their obvious differences as characters, both act irrationally and impractically, so they renounce the comradeship of their fellow travelers. Furthermore, when "the Fear of the North" finally reaches them, any trace of sobriety and common sense is utterly lost, as is "all semblance of humanity" when they end up "taking on the appearance of wild beasts, hunted and desperate" (par. 68). Cuthfert and Weatherbee are conclusively defeated, not only because "the Northland is the Northland" (par. 83)

but also because they fail to adopt a more judicious, more practical attitude toward their situation.

The opposite is actually true for the protagonist in "To Build a Fire." Like "In a Far Country," this is "a cautionary tale about men in the wild" (Raskin 199), but conversely, it warns against an overly pragmatic view of danger and suffering in the face of reality. Interestingly enough, London offers no absolutes in his narrative about the wild or about how to approach it. According to Raskin, "For London the wild was far richer and more complex..." (199). Thus, Cuthbert and Weatherbee fail because they lack the pragmatism that the protagonist in "To Build a Fire" possesses in abundance but that also accounts for his own failure. He is referred to only as "the man," which suggests his detachment and isolation, and "[t]he trouble with him was that he was without imagination. He was quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances" (2). His constant foil, the "wolf-dog," is not fettered by the hardheaded, utilitarian outlook on life that drastically weakens the protagonist's chance of survival. The dog is "*depressed* by the tremendous cold [my emphasis]... Its instinct told it a truer tale than was told to the man by the man's judgment" (5). Even fear fails to awaken the man from his stubborn sense of logic and practicality. All throughout the narrative, numerous references to his feelings of panic and astonishment are made, but every time, they are followed by his material calculations, observations, and reflective attempts at calmness (9, 12, 20, 21, 26). He keeps stepping in and out of a zone of "controlled despair" (23), struggling to believe that

he will actually be saved and, with a few less toes, still manage to keep living. However, his exceptionally pragmatic vision of the world prevents him from "meeting death with dignity" like he expects (31). He becomes obsessed with surviving at all costs, and even when he finally stops fighting and embraces death, his final thought is an utterly pragmatic one: "It certainly was cold" (32).

In *The Grey*, pragmatism is met with a combination of severity and depth. Ottway, like the protagonist in "To Build a Fire," is a pragmatic man, but *unlike* him, he has a tormented past, a painful secret that explicates much of his conduct in relation to himself and to others. As soon as the plane crashes, Ottway takes control of the situation, and his first act as a leader is ushering an agonizing victim into his death. His voice is soft; his expression, calm, even sweet, as he tells the dying man exactly what to do. A few moments later, as the other characters are still trying to assimilate, amongst tears, curses, and even laughs, what has just happened, Ottway swiftly readopts an energetic stance. He counts the survivors and determinedly announces, "We need a fire... It's about ten below and dropping." His hands shake as he tries a lighter, but he continues, "So we don't die. We build up a fire, then we find food, and at daybreak, we figure out what way is south, and we start walking." Other characters naively expect to be found and rescued, but Ottway knows better and appeals to logic in order to convince the others that his plan of action is best. This practical, authoritative posture soon transforms Ottway into the only source of hope for almost all other characters, even when

it seems to obscure his own humanity. During the cliff scene, Henrick points this out. Ottway unaffectedly instructs him as he prepares to jump: "Don't get a good running start; get a great one. Now, you'll free fall about thirty feet, but it's gonna feel like thirty thousand." Henrick then asks, "Is this supposed to pass for a pep talk?" This remark stresses Ottway's pragmatism and apparent lack of sensitivity, much in the same way as the man in "To Build a Fire" fails to consider his own emotions as he faces the cold. However, Ottway's character is deeper. When it is *his* turn to face the end, he is practical enough to arm himself but conjures his most profound emotions and passionately recites his father's poem.

Ottway's sense of reality, however, is still a very unsentimental one when it comes to explaining life and death. "I really wish I could believe in that stuff," he says, meaning the afterlife, "This is real, the cold." He takes a breath and exhales, then goes on, "That's real, the air in my lungs, those bastards out there in the dark stalking us. It's this world that I'm worried about, Talget, not the next." To Talget's question "What about faith?" Ottway's only answer is half a smile. Old Koskoosh's attitude is surprisingly similar. Although he spends half the story absorbed by his memories, he knows quite well that the only reality that matters is that which he is living at the moment. "He did not complain," the narrator says, "It was the way of life, and it was just" (par. 11). However, the stoicism with which the old man faces his end does not prevent him from clinging to life for as long as he possibly can. Like the moose of his childhood, "[h]e had done his task long since, but none the less was life dear

to him" (par. 16), hence the paradox of living and dying, at least in London's and Carnahan's view: No matter how much a man desires to keep on living, the world weighs upon him until death comes.

The paradox of a naturalistic world that so much pervades London's narrative is also made evident in *The Grey*. The unromantic way in which Koskoosh, Cuthfert and Weatherbee, and the man in "To Build a Fire" die is the same way in which the characters in *The Grey* also die, one by one, with no possibility against their environment. Even though Ottway is the first one to fight for survival in the cold, he is also the first to admit that there is nothing that anyone, especially God, will do about it. Diaz and Koskoosh agree with him. The former cynically affirms that "Fate doesn't give a fuck." Koskoosh, likewise, is capable of only one abstract thought: "Nature [is] not kindly to the flesh. She [has] no concern for the concrete thing called the individual" (par. 11). The protagonist in "To Build a Fire" mechanically insists on surviving, but not so much because he relies on a natural instinct to do so, like the dog that accompanies him, but because he is simply supposed to: "... all this... made no impression on the man" (2). According to Raskin, "London thought in terms of paradox" (199), and here is an example: if Nature does not care about the man, this particular man does not care about Nature either. Naturalism in "To Build a Fire" is also made evident through the image of the wolf-dog, which simply sits and waits for its master to die, and afterwards "turn[s] and trot[s] up the trail in the direction of the camp it knew, where were the other food-providers and fire-providers"

(34). In *The Grey*, the cold, the altitude, the blizzard, the cliff, and the river all share in this same indifference of the universe. Nevertheless, unlike the husky in "To Build a Fire," the wolves in the movie have an agenda. According to Talget, "Wolves are the only animal that will seek revenge." If this is true, they are not as indifferent as the other elements, and the men are all the more at a loss in their fight for survival.

Finally, in "In a Far Country," there are no wolves, only two "Kilkenny cats" fighting against each other until the end (par. 29). In their case, the naturalist paradox lies in the fact that, although the universe is indifferent, and not even the wind stirs, Cuthfert and Weatherbee are not, and each one becomes Nature's force of doom against the other. The Fear of the North possesses them, and in the process, the universe disappears; "The world [they] had so recently left, with its busy nations and great enterprises, seemed very far away" (par. 52). For Cuthfert, in particular, "[t]his was the Universe, dead and cold and dark, and he its only citizen" (par. 56). Such phantoms as those which afflict the protagonists also end up taunting them with the illusion of hope. At one point near the end, Cuthfert and Weatherbee feel sane enough to go outside and contemplate the skyline, where "they [watch] the false dawn slowly grow" (par. 76). Such vision sets them raving with joy and hope to the point of crying and holding hands together. "The ice-locked winter would be broken; the winds would blow and the forests answer; the land would bathe in the blessed sunshine, and life renew" (par. 81). However, "the promise was destined to remain unfulfilled" (par. 83). The effect of the North in their minds

and souls was so profound that there was no way back for them. In the end, the universe wins, this time through its impression on human nature.

A similar quasi-spiritual moment occurs also in *The Grey* when Ottway momentarily resorts to faith. As the pragmatic, utterly realistic man that he is, he refuses to believe in anything intangible. For him, Nature is real, and the wolves, his real enemies. Nevertheless, after dramatically failing to save Henrick from drowning and finding himself completely alone as a result, Ottway collapses on the snow and cries out to God, "Do something!" He contemplates the white sky and blasphemes. "Show me something real!" he shouts desperately amongst sobs, and terribly angry, he yells, "I'm calling on you!" Absolute silence ensues; the Universe is perfectly indifferent. A head close-up of Ottway's face shows every muscle of it gradually relax; he also becomes indifferent. "Fuck it," he says softly, "I'll do it myself." Like it was for Cuthfert and Weatherbee, any trace of hope has been lost forever, and like it was for Koskoosh and for the traveler in "To Build a Fire," the law of Nature finally conquers everything.

On the premise that every man must face his own fight and that the environment is up against him in every possible way, both London and Carnahan present readers and viewers with a number of characters that resemble and mimic each other. Each one of them speaks through their senses, through their relationships with the real world, and through their responses to that universe which afflicts them. They also find ways to come to terms with their roles of leaders or followers; they transform the identity of their groups

by fulfilling their tasks or by succumbing to them. Some of them more than others stay in touch with their past and with what they see in it, and when they conjure it, they help audiences better understand their present. Most learn that there is no survival without a pragmatic sense of reality, yet they also learn that pragmatism without imagination is also a deathly trap. Finally, all of them realize that they are alone in the world, that Nature has no interest in saving them, and that surviving in the wild, if at all possible, means surviving on one's own.

Whether it is in the words of a narrator or in the language spoken by an actor's body, the characters that come to life on the page or on the screen always communicate something of importance. In *The Grey*, director and writer John Carnahan has found a way to express a vision of the world that echoes that of Jack London in his stories. Although the film does not attempt to reproduce or adapt any of London's narratives, its protagonist and a few of the other characters in it certainly materialize many of the personae that London created. Ottway is, in many ways, Koskoosh, especially in his exploration of the past and in his ultimate understanding of "the law of life." Ottway is also Cuthfert and Weatherbee in that he also faces and reacts to "the Fear of the North" in accordance with his own psychological and spiritual nature. And Ottway is the man traveling off the Yukon trail and fighting against the elements and against his own sense of logic. At the same time, Ottway is none of these men, for he sees, feels, thinks, and acts in his own way. A character is always his own character in much the same way a person must be his or her own

person, regardless of who has created the world in which they must live. That is the magnificent power of characters, that they transcend plots and settings and find each other in the transgeneric web of narrative.

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