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Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

The author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a work of fiction. One practice of examining a literary work, biographical criticism, looks through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to more fully understand the book.

Jack London's formal education stopped after grammar school. As a teenager, he held a variety of jobs to help support his family, but never gave up his goal of pursuing an education. At age 19, London enrolled as a freshman at Oakland High School while working there as a janitor. He quit school after one year, but was eventually admitted to the University of California, Berkeley. Frustrated by the slow pace of his classes, he dropped out after one semester and began a life-long practice of self-education, often reading and studying more than fifteen hours a day.

His brother-in-law, Captain James Shepard, asked London to join him in the 1897 Klondike gold rush. They began the ill-fated adventure that summer. Shepard died in the Klondike, and London became stricken with scurvy that winter. London returned to San Francisco in July 1898, but this one year provided inspiration and material for many stories.

Discussion Activities

Listen to the Big Read CD. Have students take notes as they listen. Ask students to read the following essays from the Reader's Guide: "Jack London" and "London and His Other Works." Have them present the three most important points they learned from the CD and Reader's Guide.

Jack London often encouraged unpublished writers to work hard, write consistently, and "have a philosophy." In a letter to one such writer, London wrote, "There's only one way to make a beginning, and that is to begin; and begin with hard work, patience, prepared for all the disappointments [. . .] which were mine before I succeeded." Ask your students how this advice might apply to them as they plan their own educations and careers.

Writing Exercise

Jack London belonged to the working-class poor until he achieved literary fame. Even without a high school education, he was voracious reader, spending several hours reading before he fell asleep every night. Ask your students to write a one-page essay about their work experience and reading habits. Can they relate to any part of Jack London's struggle to obtain an education? How does education fit into the pursuit of their goals and dreams?

Homework

Read *The Call of the Wild*, Chapter 1: "Into the Primitive" and Handout One from this guide. Why does Manuel steal and sell Buck? What does the "man with the red sweater" teach Buck?