



**READING 2A** Analyze the way in which the theme or meaning of a selection represents a view or comment on the human condition.

# The Law of Life

Based on the short story by Jack London

## How do people face DEATH?

Death comes to all of us, but different cultures approach life's end in different ways. The death described in London's story may seem cruel to you. However, once you consider the challenges faced by the community described in the story, you may change your view.

**WRITE IT** Think about how your culture treats people who are dying. What traditions help people prepare for death? How do these traditions serve both the people who are dying and those who will lose someone they care about? Write a few notes in the notebook at the left.

### Preparing for Death

1. *Writing a will helps people*

*feel prepared.*

2. \_\_\_\_\_

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3. \_\_\_\_\_

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### Literary Analysis: Theme

**Theme** is the central message about life that is communicated by a literary work. The theme may be stated directly, but often it is implied or suggested through literary elements. The answers to questions such as the following can help you identify a story's theme.

- What about the physical or cultural **setting** is important?
- What attitudes and traits do the main **characters** display?
- What is the **resolution**, or final outcome, of the primary **conflict**?
- What **symbols** are used, and what do they suggest about the theme?
- What meaning does the **title** convey?

Ask yourself these questions as you read "The Law of Life." Use the answers to help you understand the theme of the story.

## Reading Skill: Analyze Author's Perspective

An **author's perspective** is the combination of background, experiences, beliefs, and values that influences the way a writer looks at a topic. As a young man, Jack London went to Alaska, where "The Law of Life" takes place. He hoped to get rich by finding gold. Instead, he became ill and had to return home. But the harsh conditions of the North changed and inspired him.

You can use information about London's life along with details in the story to draw conclusions about his perspective, as shown below.



**READING 5A** Evaluate how different literary elements shape the author's portrayal of the plot and setting in works of fiction.

Information About Jack London	What the Text Says	London's Perspective
<i>At 17, he boarded a ship for a seal-hunting expedition, leaving his family behind.</i>	<i>"Sit-cum-to-ha was his daughter's daughter, but she was too busy to waste a thought upon her broken grandfather..."</i>	<i>Young people tend to think only of themselves.</i>

As you read, you will be asked to record similar information in order to help you understand London's perspective on various subjects.

## Vocabulary in Context

Note: Words are listed in the order in which they appear in the story.

**Replenish** (rih.PLEN ish) is a verb that means *to fill up again*.

Rain is needed to **replenish** the town's water supply.

**Attest** (uh TEST) is a verb that means *to prove to be true; to be proof of*.

The librarian will **attest** to Daniel's love of reading.

**Inexorable** (in EK suhr uh buhl) is an adjective that means *unable to be stopped*.

Strong friendships can survive the **inexorable** passage of time.

## Vocabulary Practice

Review the words and sample sentences above. Then complete each sentence below.

1. We needed to **replenish** the supplies because

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2. If she couldn't find anyone to **attest** to her honesty, she

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3. The **inexorable** wind meant that the building had to have

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**SET A PURPOSE FOR READING**

Read this short story to find out about one culture's attitude toward death.

# THE LAW OF LIFE



Based on the short story by  
**JACK LONDON**

**BACKGROUND** Jack London wrote this story when he was about 25 years old. The characters are members of a native tribe whose culture is shaped by the harsh conditions of the Arctic. The tribe travels from place to place, looking for enough food to survive, and the needs of the group are put above those of the individual.

Old Koskoosh listened greedily. Though his sight had long since faded, his hearing was still good, and the slightest sound penetrated to the glimmering intelligence which still lived behind his wrinkled forehead. Ah! that was Sit-cum-to-ha, cursing at the dogs as she beat them into the harness. Sit-cum-to-ha was his daughter's daughter, but she was too busy to waste a thought upon her broken grandfather, sitting alone there in the snow, forlorn and helpless. Camp must be broken. The long trail waited while the short day refused to linger. Life called her, and the  
10 duties of life, not death. And he was very close to death now. **A**

The thought made the old man panicky for the moment, and he stretched out a shaking hand which wandered over the small heap of dry wood beside him. Reassured that it was indeed there, his hand returned to the shelter of his mangy furs, and he again sat and listened. The crackling of half-frozen hides told him that the chief's moose-skin lodge had been taken down and was being folded into a portable shape. The chief was his son,

**A THEME**

Underline information about the **setting** you find in lines 1-10. What is happening in this opening scene?

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sturdy and strong, and a mighty hunter. As the women toiled with the camp luggage, his voice rose, scolding them for their  
 20 slowness. Old Koskoosh strained his ears. It was the last time he would hear that voice. A child whimpered, and a woman soothed it. Little Koo-tee, the old man thought, a fretful child, and not very strong. It would die soon, perhaps, and they would burn a hole through the frozen **tundra** and pile rocks above to keep the wolverines away. Well, what did it matter? In the end, Death waited, ever-hungry and hungriest of them all. **B**

What was that? Oh, the men loading the sleds. He listened. The whips lashed at the dogs. Hear them whine! How they hated the work and the trail! They were off! Sled after sled  
 30 churned slowly away into the silence. They were gone. They had passed out of his life, and he faced the last bitter hour alone. No. The snow crunched beneath a moccasin; a man stood beside him; upon his head a hand rested gently. His son was good to do this thing. He remembered other old men whose sons had not waited after the tribe. But his son had. His mind wandered away into the past, till the young man's voice brought him back.

"Is it well with you?" he asked.

And the old man answered, "It is well."

"There is wood beside you," the younger man continued,  
 40 "and the fire burns bright. The morning is gray, and the cold has broken. It will snow presently. Even now it is snowing."

"Ay, even now it is snowing."

"The tribesmen hurry. Their loads are heavy, and their bellies flat with lack of feasting. The trail is long and they travel fast. I go now. It is well?"

"It is well. I am as a last year's leaf, clinging lightly to the stem. The first breath that blows, and I fall. My eyes no longer show me the way of my feet, and my feet are heavy, and I am tired. It is well." **C**

50 He bowed his head till the last noise of the complaining snow had died away, and he knew his son was beyond recall. Then his hand crept out in haste to the wood. It alone stood between him and the eternity that pressed in upon him. At last



### VISUAL VOCABULARY

The **tundra** is the plain that borders the earth's arctic areas. The subsoil is permanently frozen, so no trees can grow there.

### **B** THEME

Koskoosh hears a baby he thinks might die soon. Underline phrases in lines 21–26 that reveal his attitude toward the child's possible death.

### **C** THEME

Reread lines 37–49. Do you think Koskoosh is really okay? Explain what **character** traits he reveals by answering the way he does.

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Monitor Your Comprehension

his life would be measured by a handful of sticks. One by one they would go to feed the fire, and just so, step by step, death would creep upon him. When the last stick had burned, the frost would begin to gather strength. First his feet would yield, then his hands; and the numbness would travel, slowly, from the extremities to the body. His head would fall forward upon his 60 knees, and he would rest. It was easy. All men must die.

**IN OTHER WORDS** Old, blind Koskoosh sits in the snow and listens as the camp is packed up and loaded onto sleds. Everyone leaves but his son, who asks Koskoosh if he is all right and reminds him there is a fire and a pile of sticks beside him. Then the son goes to join the others.

► Underline what Koskoosh expects will happen to him next.

**D AUTHOR'S PERSPECTIVE**

Review the information in the chart below. Then complete the chart by drawing a conclusion about Jack London's perspective on life's cycles.

**Information About London**

He arrived in Alaska in the late fall. He spent the winter far from other people in a remote cabin, where he became very sick. He had to wait until spring before he could seek medical attention.

**What the Text Says**

*[Nature] had no concern for the individual. Her interest lay in the species, the race. Koskoosh knew this. He saw it demonstrated in all parts of life. The rise of the sap, the bursting greenness of the willow bud, the fall of the yellow leaf. . . .*

**London's Perspective**

Four horizontal lines for writing a conclusion.

He did not complain. It was the way of life, and it was fair. It was the law of all flesh. Nature was not kind to the flesh. She had no concern for the individual. Her interest lay in the species, the race. Koskoosh knew this. He saw it demonstrated in all parts of life. The rise of the sap, the bursting greenness of the willow bud, the fall of the yellow leaf—in this alone was told the whole history. Only one task did Nature give to the individual. If he didn't perform it, he died. If he did perform it, he died all the same. Nature did not care; there were plenty who were 70 obedient, and it was only the obedience in this matter, not those who obeyed, which lived and lived always. **D**

The tribe of Koskoosh was very old. The old men he had known when a boy had known old men before them. Therefore it was true that the tribe lived, that it stood for the obedience of all its members, way down into the forgotten past. Individuals could pass away like clouds. Nature did not care. To life she set one task and gave one law. To reproduce was the task of life. Its law was death. A maiden was a good creature to look upon, with spring to her step and light in her eyes. But her task was yet before her. 80 She grew fairer and fairer to look upon, till some hunter took her to his lodge to become the mother of his children. And with the

coming of her offspring her looks left her. Her limbs dragged and shuffled, her eyes dimmed, and only the little children found joy against the wrinkled cheek of the old squaw by the fire. Her task was done. At the first pinch of famine or the first long trail, she would be left, even as he had been left, in the snow, with a little pile of wood. Such was the law.

He placed a stick carefully upon the fire and resumed his thoughts. It was the same everywhere, with all things. The  
90 mosquitoes vanished with the first frost. The little tree-squirrel crawled away to die. When age settled upon the rabbit it became slow and heavy, and it could no longer outrun its enemies. He remembered how he had abandoned his own father on an upper reach of the Klondike one winter. ❸

Koskoosh placed another stick on the fire and sent his thoughts back deeper into the past. There was the time of the Great Famine, when the old men crouched empty-bellied around the fire. He had lost his mother in that famine. In the summer the salmon run had failed, and the tribe looked forward to the  
100 winter and the coming of the **caribou**. But the caribou did not come, and the rabbits had not **replenished**, and the dogs were nothing but bundles of bones. And through the long darkness the children wailed and died, and the women, and the old men; and not one in ten of the tribe lived to meet the sun when it came back in the spring. That was a famine!

**IN OTHER WORDS** Koskoosh recognizes that Nature gives each living thing one job, which is to reproduce, or to have babies. Koskoosh also recognizes Nature's law, which is that each living thing must die. He left his own father to die; in the same way, Koskoosh has been left to die. His mother and many others died in a famine.

But he had seen times of plenty, too, when the dogs were fat and the women were fertile, and the lodges were full of children. He remembered seeing, when he was a boy during a time of plenty, a moose pulled down by the wolves. Zing-ha lay with

### ❸ THEME

Reread lines 72–94. What does Koskoosh believe is the main point of life?

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### VISUAL VOCABULARY

**Caribou** are large deer that live in herds in northern regions.

### VOCABULARY

The word **replenish** (rih PLEN ish) is a verb that means *to fill up again*.



Monitor Your Comprehension

110 him in the snow and watched—Zing-ha, who later became the craftiest of hunters, and who, in the end, fell through an air-hole on the Yukon. They found him, a month afterward, just as he had crawled halfway out and frozen stiff to the ice.

But the moose. Zing-ha and he had gone out that day to play at hunting. On the bed of the creek they saw the fresh track of a moose, and with it the tracks of many wolves. “An old one,” Zing-ha, who was quicker at reading the signs, said—“an old moose who cannot keep up with the herd. The wolves have separated him from his brothers, and they will never leave him.”

120 And it was so. It was their way. By day and by night, they would follow him and snarl at him and snap at him. They would stay by him till he died. How Zing-ha and he had felt the blood-lust quicken! The finish would be a sight to see! F

They followed the trail. Hot were they on the heels of the chase, reading the grim tragedy in the tracks. They came to the place where the moose had made a stand. In every direction, the snow had been stamped on and thrown about. In the midst were the deep impressions of the moose’s hooves, and everywhere were the lighter footmarks of the wolves. One wolf had been 130 caught in a wild lunge of the maddened victim and trampled to death. A few bones, well picked, told the story.

They walked further, and they came to the place where the moose took another stand. Here the great animal had fought desperately. Twice had he been dragged down, as the snow attested. Twice he had shaken off his enemies and gained footing once more. He had done his task long ago, but none the less he wanted to live. G

Later, they came to where the moose had tried to climb the bank and get into the woods. The trail was red now, and the 140 clean stride of the great beast had grown short and irregular. Then Koskoosh and Zing-ha heard the first sounds of the battle—not the full-throated howling of the chase, but the short, snappy bark which spoke of close quarters and teeth to flesh. Zing-ha crawled through the snow, and with him crept

F LANGUAGE COACH

The term *blood-lust* in line 122 means a strong desire for killing or violence.

VOCABULARY

The word *attest* (uh TEST) is a verb that means *to prove to be true; to be proof of*.

G THEME

Reread lines 106–137. Notice how much detail London provides about the **conflict** between the moose and the wolves. What idea do you think the moose might **symbolize**, or represent?

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Koskoosh, who was to be chief of the tribesmen in the years to come. Together they shoved aside the under branches of a young spruce and peered forth. It was the end they saw.

**IN OTHER WORDS** Koskoosh remembers that as a boy, he and his friend tracked an old moose that was being hunted by wolves. The boys could tell from the tracks that the moose tried to fight. They watched the wolves kill the moose.

► With a partner, discuss how the boys felt about the moose’s death. Draw brackets [ ] around details that help you answer.

The picture, like all of youth’s memories, was still strong with him. His dim eyes watched the moose’s final struggle  
150 as if he were crouched down looking at it now. For long he thought on the days of his youth, till the fire died down and the frost bit deeper. He added two sticks this time, and he measured how much longer he would live by what remained. If his granddaughter had gathered a larger armful, his remaining hours would have lasted longer. It would have been easy. But she was a careless child and hadn’t honored her ancestors from the time the grandson of Zing-ha first cast eyes upon her. Well, what did it matter? Had he not done likewise in his own quick youth? For a while he listened to the silence. Perhaps the heart  
160 of his son might soften, and he would come back with the dogs to take his old father on with the tribe to where the caribou ran thick and the fat hung heavy upon them. ❶

He strained his ears. Not a stir, nothing. It was very lonely. Hark! What was that? A chill passed over his body. The familiar, long-drawn howl broke the silence, and it was close at hand. Then on his darkened eyes was projected the vision of the moose—the old bull moose—the torn flanks and bloody sides, the great branching horns, tossing to the last. He saw the flashing forms of wolves, the gleaming eyes, the lolling tongues,  
170 the fangs. And he saw the inexorable circle close in till it became a dark point in the midst of the stamped snow. ❶

❶ AUTHOR’S PERSPECTIVE

When Jack London returned home from Alaska, he found that the stepfather who had raised him had died. Reread lines 148–162. Underline details that might reflect this experience.

VOCABULARY

The word **inexorable** (in EK suhr uh buhl) is an adjective that means *unable to be stopped*.

❶ THEME

What is the resolution, or final outcome, of the conflict between the moose and the wolves?

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Monitor Your Comprehension

1 THEME

In what ways is Koskoosh similar to the moose? In what ways is he different?

Ways they are similar: \_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_

Ways they are different: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

A cold muzzle thrust against his cheek, and at its touch his soul leaped back to the present. His hand shot into the fire and dragged out a burning stick. For a moment, the wolf retreated. The brute raised a long call to his brothers; and greedily they answered, till a ring of crouching, jaw-slobbered gray was stretched around him. The old man waved his stick wildly, and sniffs turned to snarls, but the panting brutes refused to scatter.

Why should he cling to life? he asked himself, and he  
180 dropped the blazing stick into the snow. It sizzled and went out. Again he saw the last stand of the old bull moose, and Koskoosh dropped his head wearily upon his knees. What did it matter after all? Was it not the law of life? 1

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**IN OTHER WORDS** Koskoosh sits by the fire and remembers his youth. He wishes his granddaughter had left him more wood. He listens to see if his son will come back for him. Then wolves begin to circle him. At first, he defends himself with fire. Then he remembers the old moose he watched die. He decides not to fight, since he knows that every living thing must die.

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**Literary Analysis: Theme**

Remember that **theme** is the central message about life that is communicated by a literary work. To find the theme of “The Law of Life,” first answer the questions in the chart below. Support your answers with details from the story.



**READING 2A** Analyze the way in which the theme or meaning of a selection represents a view or comment on the human condition.

Finding Theme by Using Literary Elements	
How does the <b>setting</b> affect the lives of the characters? (Remember that setting includes culture and time period as well as place.)	<i>Cold, harsh conditions make survival difficult. Koskooshi's mother died in a famine.</i>
What is the main <b>character's</b> attitude toward death?	
What is the <b>resolution</b> of the story's main <b>conflict</b> ?	
What does the moose <b>symbolize</b> , or represent, about life?	
The <b>title</b> of the story is mentioned in the story's last line. What is the law of life?	

Review your answers in the chart above, as well as the notes you took while reading. What do you think is the **theme** or message of the story?

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## After Reading



**READING 5A** Evaluate how different literary elements shape the author's portrayal of the plot and setting in works of fiction.

### Reading Strategy: Author's Perspective

What is Jack London's perspective on Alaska, where "The Law of Life" is set? In the first column of the chart below, read the information about Jack London's experience in Alaska. In the second column, write down details from the story that might connect with London's experience. In the third column, draw a conclusion about how he views the rugged northern region.

Information About London in Alaska	Details from the Story	London's Perspective on Alaska
<i>Trying to become rich, he went there when he was young but he became very sick. He says he "found himself" there.</i>		

### *How do people face DEATH?*

In "The Law of Life," Jack London shows how one culture deals with death. Recall your thoughts on how your culture prepares for death. What similarities and differences are there between your culture's attitude toward meeting death and the attitude expressed in London's story? Discuss your ideas with a partner.

### Vocabulary Practice

Determine the relationship between each pair of words. If the words have similar meanings, write *synonym* on the line. If they have opposite meanings, write *antonym*.

1. replenish      refill      \_\_\_\_\_
2. attest          deny          \_\_\_\_\_
3. inexorable      relentless      \_\_\_\_\_

## Academic Vocabulary in Speaking

The word **apparent** (uh PAIR uhnt) is an adjective that means *clear or obvious; easily seen*.

His love for his father was **apparent** in his kind actions.

The word **focus** (FOH kuhz) is a noun that means *a point or center of attention*.

Getting enough to eat was the **focus** of the group.

As a verb, **focus** means *to direct toward a specific point or purpose*.

When tracking an animal, **focus** your attention on the ground.

**TURN AND TALK** What is important to the tribe of people to which Koskoosh belongs? What **focus** is **apparent** in their actions? Discuss your ideas with a partner. Be sure to use the words **apparent** and **focus** in your discussion.



**READING 2A** Analyze the way in which the theme or meaning of a selection represents a view or comment on the human condition. **5A** Evaluate how different literary elements shape the author's portrayal of the plot and setting in works of fiction.

## Texas Assessment Practice

**DIRECTIONS** Use "The Law of Life" to answer questions 1–6.

- Koskoosh expects to die —
  - in the arms of his son
  - in the warmth of a lodge
  - by freezing to death
  - much later in his life
- How does Koskoosh die?
  - He freezes to death.
  - He slips into a coma.
  - He is eaten by wolves.
  - He falls through the ice.
- Koskoosh's son leaves him behind because —
  - he is a lazy son who treats Koskoosh with disrespect
  - Koskoosh will slow the group as it moves to find more food
  - he wants to take over Koskoosh's position as chief of the tribe
  - Koskoosh's illness is contagious, and others could be infected
- One theme of the story is that —
  - life's central purpose is to care for the elderly
  - dying is a peaceful and welcome relief
  - young people don't know about death
  - death is unavoidable and unpredictable
- London uses the moose in the story to support the theme that —
  - we fight death but it can't be defeated
  - we should live in groups for safety
  - we will be attacked in life
  - we can use technology to overcome nature
- Jack London's perspective on life in Alaska is probably most affected by —
  - the hardships he faced in Alaska
  - the stories he heard in San Francisco
  - the greed revealed during the Alaska gold rush
  - the money he earned during the Alaska gold rush