

THE STORY OF AN EYEWITNESS

Jack London

Analysis by Fausto Ciompi

Essay

The Story of an Eyewitness by Jack London was published in 1906, documenting the San Francisco earthquake of April 18. This newspaper feature story focuses on infrastructural collapse, widespread fires, and collective resilience, celebrating American stoicism and pragmatism. London adopts a detached, analytical perspective that prioritizes reconstruction efforts and heroic responses rather than psychoemotional trauma.

Year of Publication	1906
Publication Place	New York
Editor	Collier & Sons
Entity	1906 San Francisco earthquake
Magazine	Collier's: The National Weekly Magazine

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Earthquake 1906 San Francisco earthquake

REAL EVENT

Time	April 18, 1906, at 5:12 AM Pacific Standard Time
Location	California USA
Coordinates	37.775505, -122.434715
Impacted Areas	San Francisco, Santa Rosa, San Jose (California). 476 km around the epicentre
Seismic Fault	San Andreas fault
Magnitude	Magnitudo momento: 7.8. Richter: 8.3
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake
Anthropization Level	Public Buildings

"The city was unrecognizable. The skyline was a forest of jagged chimneys and broken walls, and a pall of smoke hung above it" (Fradkin 77)

Houses

Factories

"More than 28,000 buildings were destroyed. The business district had ceased to exist" (Fradkin 75)

Social Impacts

Deaths

"The total number of deaths resulting from the earthquake and fire is estimated at 700 in San Francisco and about 300 elsewhere, bringing the overall death toll to approximately 1,000." (U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), Circular 1245, 2002 6); "'Modern estimates range from 3,000 to over 5,000 deaths.'" (Fradkin 5)

Destruction Of Public Buildings

Trauma

"Dear Robert : I keep thinking about that picture -- I cannot get it out of my mind. I think -- no, I know -- that it is the most moving, the most eloquent, the most profoundly pathetic picture I have ever seen. It wrings the heart to look at it, it is so desolate, so grieved. It realizes San Francisco to us as words have not done & cannot do. I wonder how many women can look upon it & keep back their tears -- or how many unhardened men, for that matter? Yours ever MARK". Twain, Mark. "Letter" of April 30, 1906 to Robert Reid

Social Disruption

"Ordinary people exhibit altruism and resourcefulness amidst disasters, even as elites fall prey to panic. The 1906 San Francisco earthquake shows how communal solidarity can outshine fear" (Solnit 27)

Earthquake 1906 San Francisco earthquake

LITERARY EVENT

Time	1906
Location	California USA
Impacted Areas	San Francisco
Emphasis Phase	Post-disaster (consequences)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Without reference
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake
Anthropization Level	Cities
Social Impacts	DeathsInjuriesDestruction Of Goods/CommoditiesDestruction Of DwellingsDestruction Of Public BuildingsDestruction Of Cultural Heritage (Materials And Sites)Social DisruptionTraumaRecoveryPoverty

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name	Wealthy people
Reactions	Intervention Solidarity Cooperation Order Rationality Empathy Trust Pragmatism Sharing Of Information
Name	Politicians
Reactions	Intervention Solidarity Cooperation Order
Name	Common people
Reactions	Intervention Cooperation Solidarity Order Rationality Empathy Trust Pragmatism

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	Earthquake Dollars Fire Ruins Imperial City Doomed City Calm Heroism
Metaphors	"The street was a wall of flame" (23)
Similes	"toiling for a dozen hours like giants" (23)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Fire Death Ruins Ideal Community Magics
Syntax	Parataxis, High Frequency Connectives
Punctuation	No Peculiarities

Jack London's "The Story of an Eyewitness"—a firsthand account of the San Francisco earthquake of April 18, 1906—was published in *Collier's Magazine* on May 5 of that same year. The opening paragraph strikes a surprisingly materialistic tone. Rather than expressing immediate sympathy for the victims, London focuses on the economic toll, reporting the destruction of property and business in stark, numerical terms. His tone seems tailored to the utilitarian and economically minded sensibility of the pragmatic reader:

"The earthquake shook down in San Francisco hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of walls and chimneys. But the conflagration that followed burned up hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of property. There is no way to estimate the actual damage within hundreds of millions. In all of history, no modern imperial city has been so completely destroyed. San Francisco is gone" (22).

Indeed, the earthquake had profound consequences—not only for the economy but also for the landscape and patterns of human migration. As one scholar argues, “the 1906 San Francisco earthquake left a long-lasting mark, interrupting the path-dependence of chain migration and redirecting migrants to less-affected regions of the American West” (Ager 45). It also left a personal mark on London’s life. In the words of a London biographer:

"The five-ton iron keel of the forty-five-foot ketch *Snark*—which London had designed—was to have been laid at the H. P. Anderson Shipyard in San Francisco on April 18, 1906, but fate intervened in the guise of the San Francisco Earthquake, which struck as far north as Santa Rosa, near the Londons’ ranch; they could see the fires in San Francisco from the top of Sonoma Mountain. Perhaps this was an omen. By the time the *Snark* was ready, a year behind schedule and over budget the spring of 1907, it had had its share of woes. Many more were to come, some caused by the earthquake, in the form of shoddy materials and craftsmanship used due to the construction boom" (Reesman 118).

Following this initial economic framing, London’s article unfolds in a series of vivid, fragmented observations, often introduced with spatial or temporal cues such as “An hour later,” (London 23), “On Mission Street,” (23), or “Two minutes before” (23). Another notable stylistic feature is the repeated use of the adjective/adverb “all,” especially at the beginning of sentences. This technique emphasizes the totality of the destruction: “All the cunning adjustments,” (22), “All the shrewd contrivances,” (22), “All vestiges of them were destroyed,” (22), and “All about were...” (22). These rhetorical choices also underscore the immense scale of the disaster and render the physical devastation with clinical precision.

Buildings collapse, catch fire, or are demolished with dynamite to prevent further damage. Both residential and industrial districts are obliterated; only a few homes on the outskirts remain. London’s narrative begins soon after the quake, tracing the rapid spread of flames through working-class neighborhoods and factories south of Market Street. The fire meets no resistance. In typical earthquake literature fashion, London adopts the metaphor of an enormous wall of fire. The city’s infrastructure collapses: streets are torn by ruts and fissures, water mains rupture, and in thirty seconds the earth’s upheaval makes communication impossible.

An hour later, a “lurid tower” of smoke rises, visible from a hundred miles away. It hangs in the sky for the next three days, dimming the sun. Twelve hours after the quake, half the city center has vanished. Observing from the bay, London notes an eerie calm as strong winds stoke the inferno. Citizens begin using dynamite to level hazardous structures. The fire brigade is powerless. The list of lost buildings is long, but, London implies, the list of heroic acts by San Franciscans is longer. Women remain composed. Men act decisively. The homeless vigilantly guard salvaged belongings. Some abandon their possessions only after desperate attempts to preserve them. Others bury their treasures to protect them from the flames. Evacuees flee the city in long caravans, using any available vehicle.

In a Shakespearean echo, a man offers ten thousand dollars for a team of horses—but none can be found, and he must leave his belongings behind. At night, many sleep on the grass, fed by government tents. Though the city is engulfed in misery, “everyone was gracious” (22). London meets a man who, just the day before, celebrated his birthday in luxury and “was worth six hundred thousand dollars.” (23) The next day, he has nothing. Flames roar through the ruins, and steel skeletons of grand public buildings remain as hollow monuments to what was. The day after the disaster, San Francisco resembles “the crater of a volcano” (23). Tens of thousands of refugees camp nearby. Over 100,000 people flee the peninsula. Relief pours in from across the country. The government asserts control. Even amidst the devastation, San Francisco’s affluent class is already devising plans to restore their city: “The bankers and business men are already set about making preparations to rebuild San Francisco.” (23)

Amidst the chaos, London remains focused on the destruction of homes, neighborhoods, and public buildings, as if these material losses were his main concern. The opening paragraph’s focus on monetary loss is striking. How could an eyewitness to such devastation prioritize financial concerns over human suffering? In reality, London maintained strong convictions regarding the distinction between the detached visitor-observers and the indigenous figures who appear as commentators in his stories. As Tichi notes, he viewed the former as “on-site aliens” (34). Nevertheless, in this article, he succeeds in striking a balance between the role of an analytical observer and that of an individual who demonstrates a profound understanding of the mindset and temperament of his fellow Americans. London’s prose reveals a persistent focus on privation and unfulfilled expectations in the context of

natural disaster. He consistently employs negative structures, utilizing both "not" or "no + noun" phrases to underscore the absence of critical elements and anticipated reactions. Examples include "no horses," "no dinner," "no dynamite," "no water," "no firemen," "no fire-engines," and the striking triple negation: "not one woman who wept, not one man who was excited, not one person who was in the slightest degree panic stricken" (22). His style is characteristically concise, distinguished by brief descriptions that eschew the use of metaphors and similes. Indeed, his narrative approach channels a stoic, practical, and resilient American ethos, prioritizing direct observation over rhetorical flourish. Among the sparse figurative language, a striking simile depicts the citizens fighting the fire with giant-like force. No weakness shows through. Everybody cooperates. In London's understated celebration of collective effort, even financiers and capitalists are cast as patriotic agents of reconstruction, ready to restore the city's grandeur. London "the superman" (Bembridge 79) views San Francisco citizens as his peers.

By contrast, Mark Twain's letter to Robert Reid, dated April 30, 1906, offers a more human-centered reaction to the earthquake. While London minimizes individual suffering in favour of praising heroism and efficiency, Twain lingers on death, trauma, and compassion. London speaks in terms of destruction, money, and determination; Twain writes in the language of sorrow and solidarity:

Dear Robert: I keep thinking about that picture—I cannot get it out of my mind. I think—no, I know—that it is the most moving, the most eloquent, the most profoundly pathetic picture I have ever seen. It wrings the heart to look at it, it is so desolate, so grieved. It realizes San Francisco to us as words have not done & cannot do. I wonder how many women can look upon it & keep back their tears—or how many unhardened men, for that matter? Yours ever MARK" (*Shapell Manuscript Foundation*).

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