The Cremation of Sam McGee

Robert Service
There are strange things done in the midnight sun\(^1\)
By the men who molt\(^2\) for gold;
The Arctic trails have their secret tales
That would make your blood run cold;
The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,
But the queerest they ever did see
Was that night on the marge\(^3\) of Lake Lebarge
I cremated Sam McGee.

Now Sam McGee was from Tennessee,
where the cotton blooms and blows.

Why he left his home in the South to roam
‘round the Pole, God only knows.
He was always cold, but the land of gold
seemed to hold him like a spell;
Though he’d often say in his homely way
that “he’d sooner live in hell.”

On a Christmas Day we were mushing\(^4\) our way
over the Dawson trail.
Talk of your cold! through the parka’s fold
it stabbed like a driven nail.

If our eyes we’d close, then the lashes froze
til sometimes we couldn’t see;
It wasn’t much fun, but the only one
to whimper was Sam McGee.

And that very night, as we lay packed tight
in our robes beneath the snow,
And the dogs were fed, and the stars o’erhead
were dancing heel and toe,

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1. the midnight sun: The sun visible at midnight in the Arctic or Antarctic regions during their summers.
2. molt (mōlt) v.: To molt and slave.
3. marge (märj) n.: Poetic word for the shore of the lake.
4. mushing (mush) ing v.: Traveling by foot over snow, usually with a dog sled. “Mush” is a command to sled dogs to start or to go faster.

◆ Build Vocabulary
cremated (kr’ mät’ id) v.: Burned to ashes
whimper (hwim’ per) v.: Make low, crying sounds; complain
He turned to me, and "Cap," says he, 
"I'll cash in this trip, I guess; 

And if I do, I'm asking that you 
won't refuse my last request."

Well, he seemed so low that I couldn't say no; 
then he says with a sort of moan: 
"It's the cursed cold, and it's got right hold 
till I'm chilled clean through to the bone. 
Yet 'tain't being dead—it's my awful dread 
of the icy grave that pains; 
So I want you to swear that, foul or fair, 
you'll cremate my last remains."

A pal's last need is a thing to heed, 
so I swore I would not fail; 
And we started on at the streak of dawn; 
but God! he looked ghastly pale. 
He crouched on the sleigh, and he raved all day 
of his home in Tennessee; 
And before nightfall a corpse was all 
that was left of Sam McGee.

There wasn't a breath in that land of death, 
and I hurried, horror-driven, 

With a corpse half hid that I couldn't get rid, 
because of a promise given; 
It was lashed to the sleigh, and it seemed to say: 
"You may tax your brawn and brains, 
But you promised true, and it's up to you 
to cremate those last remains."

Now a promise made is a debt unpaid, 
and the trail has its own stern code. 
In the days to come, though my lips were dumb, 
in my heart how I cursed that load.

5. cash in: Slang expression meaning "die." 
6. brawn: (brön) n.: Physical strength.
In the long, long night, by the lone firelight,
while the huskies, 7 round in a ring,
Howled out their woes to the homeless snows—
O God! how I loathed the thing.

And every day that quiet clay
seemed to heavy and heavier grow;
And on I went, though the dogs were spent
and the grub was getting low;
The trail was bad, and I felt half mad,
but I swore I would not give in;
And I’d often sing to the hateful thing,
and it hearkened with a grin.

Till I came to the marge of Lake Lebarge,
and a derelict 8 there lay;
It was jammed in the ice, but I saw in a trice
it was called the "Alice May."
And I looked at it, and I thought a bit,
and I looked at my frozen chum;
Then "Here," said I, with a sudden cry,
"is my cre-ma-tor-eum."

Some planks I tore from the cabin floor,
and I lit the boiler fire;
Some coal I found that was lying around,
and I heaped the fuel higher;
The flames just soared, and the furnace roared—
such a blaze you seldom see;
And I burrowed a hole in the glowing coal,
and I stuffed in Sam McGee.

7. huskies (hus’ kës) n.: Strong dogs used for pulling sleds over the snow.
8. derelict (der’ ī likt) n.: Abandoned ship.

◆ Build Vocabulary
ghastly (gas’ të) adj.: Ghostlike; frightful
stern (stern) adj.: Strict; unyielding
loathed (löthed) v.: Hated
Then I made a hike, for I didn't like
   to hear him sizzle so;
50   And the heavens scowled, and the huskies howled,
   and the wind began to blow.
   It was icy cold, but the hot sweat rolled
      down my cheeks, and I don't know why;
   And the greasy smoke in an inky cloak
      went streaking down the sky.

I do not know how long in the snow
   I wrestled with grisly fear;
But the stars came out and they danced about
   ere again I ventured near;
55   I was sick with dread, but I bravely said:
      "I'll just take a peep inside.
   I guess he's cooked, and it's time I looked"; . . .
   then the door I opened wide.

And there sat Sam, looking cool and calm,
   in the heart of the furnace roar;
And he wore a smile you could see a mile,
   and he said: "Please close that door.
   It's fine in here, but I greatly fear
   you'll let in the cold and storm—
60   Since I left Plumtree, down in Tennessee,
   it's the first time I've been warm."

There are strange things done in the midnight sun
   By the men who toil for gold;
The Arctic trails have their secret tales
   That would make your blood run cold;
65   The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,
     But the queerest they ever did see
   Was that night on the marge of Lake Lebarge
   I cremated Sam McGee.

◆ Build Vocabulary
grisly (griz' lë) adj.: Horrible
History Connection

The Gold Rush Is On! Just like Sam McGee and his buddy, thousands of real people went searching for Yukon gold during the Klondike Gold Rush. Beginning in 1896, when three explorers found gold in a tributary of the Klondike River, the rush took off at breakneck speed. The town of Dawson sprang up to house and serve nearly 25,000 miners. However, the Klondike Gold Rush didn’t last long. Few individual prospectors could get at the gold, especially in the Yukon’s frozen climate. Big mining groups quickly took over, and the population shrank.

Cross-Curricular Activity

Mining the Past Use encyclopedias, library reference books, and sites on the World Wide Web to find out about mining in the Yukon—in the past and in the present. Focus on how Klondike prospectors searched for gold. Identify the kind of equipment that was used, and find out how the land was manipulated to make mining possible. Then, study the way Yukon mining works today. Create a comparison-and-contrast chart showing the relationship between mining then and now.

Guide for Responding

◆ Literature and Your Life

Reader’s Response What was your reaction to the ending of the poem? Why?
Thematic Focus Do you admire the narrator for keeping his promise? Why or why not?
One-Liner Ask your classmates what they think their first words would be if they discovered a revived Sam in the furnace.

✓ Check Your Comprehension

1. What problem does Sam McGee have with his surroundings?
2. Why doesn’t he go home?
3. What does Sam ask the narrator to promise?
4. How is the narrator supposed to keep his promise?
5. Describe what the narrator finds when he opens the furnace door.

◆ Critical Thinking

Interpret

1. What do Sam’s fears reveal about his personality? [Infer]
2. Why is the speaker so determined to keep his promise? [Interpret]
3. What conflicting emotions drive the speaker as he works to fulfill his promise? [Analyze]
4. How do you think each character feels at the end of the poem? [Draw Conclusions]

Apply

5. Do you agree with the narrator that “a promise made is a debt unpaid”? Why or why not? [Make a Judgment]

Extend

6. Speculate about the ways in which modern prospectors might use special equipment and clothing to make their Yukon journeys safer and more comfortable. [Science Link]