The Call of the Wild Study Guide

The Call of the Wild by Jack London

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

The Call of the Wild first appeared in serial form in the popular magazine *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1903. Later that year, an expanded version was published in book form and enjoyed favorable reviews and commercial popularity. The novel's simple style and crude depiction of harsh realities in the frozen Klondike region appealed to a reading public tired of the sentimental, romanticized fiction that dominated the literary marketplace. At the same time, readers were drawn to it as an adventure story, a popular genre in turn-of-the-century America.

In writing the novel, Jack London drew on his experiences in the Klondike gold rush of 1897. In fact, many critics see parallels between the author's and the protagonist's experiences. The novel has been one of the most beloved animal stories ever written precisely because London was able to keep the story of a dog's adventures realistic while allowing readers to relate to Buck's perspective.

Although the novel has long been considered a children's book, many literary scholars have argued that the novel's complexities warrant close analysis. Chief among the topics of interest to scholars is the novel's relationships to the philosophy of the "survival of the fittest" that was in vogue at the turn of the century.

Overview

A gripping, fast-paced tale of adventure, The Call of the Wild focuses on Buck, a pampered sheepdog stolen from a California ranch and transported to the arctic. Buck's struggle to survive on the arctic trail demonstrates the precarious nature of life in the wild.

Although The Call of the Wild is an engaging animal story, the reader cannot help but draw parallels between Buck's experience and that of humans. The book suggests that environment shapes character, and emphasizes that primitive instincts—often hidden beneath a veneer of civilization—are never lost to the individual. Providing a fascinating glimpse of a way of life that has almost vanished, The Call of the Wild suggests that creatures survive best when they adapt to the natural world, rather than trying to impose change on their environment.

Author Biography

One of America's most prolific and beloved authors, London was born in 1876 in San Francisco, California. His family was so poor that he went to work as soon as he finished grade school. His early experiences working in a saloon and a factory, hunting seals, tramping on the railroads, and spending thirty days in prison for vagrancy provided London a wealth of material for his gritty, naturalistic fiction.

In 1894 London completed high school, attended the University of California at Berkeley for one semester, and joined the Socialist Party. He immersed himself in the writings of Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Herbert Spencer. He was intrigued by socialism and Darwin's concept of the "survival of the fittest," two ideas that would influence his later writings.

In 1897, frustrated with his unsuccessful attempts at starting a literary career, he went with his brother-in-law to the Klondike, in the Yukon territory of Canada. The gold rush in the Klondike was underway, and London hoped to strike it rich. Although he did not discover any gold, he did find subject matter for his fiction. His experiences in the frozen Northland inspired his first stories, which appeared in the nation's leading periodicals. London's fiction was very popular with the public; his stories were new and exciting and very different from the tales of romance that flooded the market during that time.

The most popular book to come out of his Alaskan experiences was *The Call of the Wild* (1903), the story of a dog's difficult transition from the warm, comfortable Southland to the wild, treacherous Northland. Many scholars find autobiographical elements in this novel, in particular London's exciting and dangerous adventures in the Klondike and his short stint in prison. Just as Buck has to learn to accept the "law of the club" and the "law of the fang," London learned how to survive in prison. The novel was one of London's greatest critical and commercial successes. Unfortunately London had accepted $2,000 for the book instead of a share of the royalties. London would not make the same mistake with his subsequent novels and short fiction. He became a wealthy man writing adventure novels. He died at the age of forty of uremia.

About the Author

Jack London was born in San Francisco on January 12, 1876. Raised in poverty, he started working part-time to support his family at the age of nine and dropped out of school a few years later to work and travel full-time. He educated himself through reading, deriving special pleasure from the stories of Washington Irving and Rudyard Kipling.

London spent his teen-age years sailing aboard a sealing schooner, tramping across the country as a hobo, and working at a variety of odd jobs. He later drew upon these early adventures in books such as The Cruise of the Dazzler (1902) and The Sea-Wolf (1904).

When he was twenty years old, London enrolled in the University of California at Berkeley. He had just begun to read Charles Darwin's Origin of Species (1859) and Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto (1848). The ideas of Darwin and Marx profoundly influenced his thinking and writing. The following year, 1897, London left California for the Klondike gold rush. Although he did not "strike it rich" there, London witnessed a culture and way of life that were to bring him success as a writer. Before he turned twenty-five, London had published his first book, The Son of the Wolf:

Tales of the Far North (1900), as well as numerous magazine stories.

Jack London died on November 22, 1916, in Santa Rosa, California, a possible suicide. Although he was only forty years old, he had already written fifty-nine books, including novels, short stories, sociological studies, essays, plays, and an autobiography. By his own admission, much of his writing was "hack work." Nonetheless, his stories from the Klondike continue to make him one of America's most popular authors.

Many of London's books have been made into movies, and his most popular, The Call of the Wild, has inspired three major film adaptations.

Plot Summary

Chapter 1: Into the Primitive

Buck is a dog living with Judge Miller at a sprawling ranch in Santa Clara Valley, California. He lives the life of a country gentleman's dog, beloved by his master and given the run of the property.

Buck's idyllic life is cut short by one of the ranch hands, Manuel, whose gambling habit and large family prompt him to sell Buck on the black market. Buck is taken by rail to a man in a red sweater, a dog breaker, who uses a club for training. Buck's spirit is beaten, but not broken; he learns to adapt to his changing environment. He's bought by two French Canadians, Perrault and Francois, fair men who have a shrewd eye for a good dog and realize Buck's worth.

Chapter 2: The Law of Club and Fang

The law of the club refers to the method humans use to extract obedience from a dog; the law of the fang refers to the method dogs use to subjugate other dogs. Buck learns about the law of the fang when Curly, one of the friendlier sled dogs, makes advances toward another dog. This other dog rips open her face, then jumps aside to avoid retaliation. Curly is then killed by thirty to forty dogs. Buck learns life in the Klondike is violent, survival belongs to the alert, and leadership belongs to the most cunning.

Buck has his first experience as a sled dog and proves to be adept at the job. The team expands to nine dogs, including Spitz, the white husky leader; Dave, an antisocial but hardworking team dog; brothers Billee and Joe, one sweet and the other sour; and Sol-leks, a one-eyed dog whose name means "the Angry One."

Next Buck learns how to survive the night by digging a hole in the snow and curling into a ball. He also learns how to steal food without getting caught and clubbed. This is the only way to ensure survival in a cruel, cold land where a dog runs all day, sleeps to run the next day, and in between might lose his life in a dog fight.

Chapter 3: The Dominant Primordial Beast

As the team works its way up the frozen Thirty Mile River to Dawson, Buck prepares to challenge Spitz. One night when Spitz confronts him, Buck attacks. However, a gang of starving, marauding dogs interrupts the fight and turns the camp upside down looking for food. The team runs off into the woods until they leave. A few days later, due to the strain of the trip, Dolly goes mad, howling like a wolf, chasing Buck until Francois finally axes her to death.

Once in Dawson, Perrault wants to travel back to Dyea. During this trip Buck undermines Spitz's authority by siding with any dissenting dog. Eventually, Spitz is powerless to make the team run as a unit. One night near the Northwest police camp, team dogs and police dogs spot a snowshoe rabbit and give chase, with Buck in the lead. Spitz challenges Buck for the rabbit. This begins their fight to the death. Although Spitz is a formidable fighter, Buck has the greater imagination and wins. As soon as Spitz falls, the other dogs kill him.

Chapter 4: Who Has Won to Mastership

Perrault and Francois promote Sol-leks as the head of the team but Buck pushes him out of place. This happens several times until, finally, Buck's demand to lead is met. With him heading the team, they make a record run. Afterwards, the men and dogs are exhausted, and the team is sold to a man who runs the Salt Water mail from Dawson to Skagway. Due to all the gold rushers, the mail load keeps growing and the dogs are pushed to their breaking point. Along the route, Dave weakens and is cut from the team. However, he refuses to be cut and returns to his place. Finally he is allowed back and, although he stumbles now and then, he does his best to pull his weight. One morning, however, Dave cannot even crawl to his place. He is left where he is and the team leaves. A few miles out, the man stops the team and walks back. The team hears a gunshot.

Chapter 5: The Toil of the Traces

The team is again sold, this time to a brother and sister and her husband. All three are inexperienced and must be told by the locals how to pack a sled. Unfortunately, they have their own ideas and end up with fourteen dogs pulling an oversized load plus the woman, who insists on riding instead of going on foot. Due to their poor calculations, the trio eventually runs low on food and must ration the dogs. Soon everyone is irritable and the dogs are starved and beaten.

The threesome asks an old, experienced Klondiker, John Thornton, for advice. He tells them they have been lucky to travel so far on a thawing river. Nevertheless, they decide to continue, but Buck will not move no matter how much they beat him. Thornton, enraged at their treatment of Buck, steps in to cut Buck from the traces, saving his life. As the man and dog bond, they watch the team run along the river, hit a thawing patch, and drown.

Chapter 6: For the Love of a Man

Thornton is a loving master, and Buck begins to love him. If not for Thornton, Buck would leave the company of men and join the wild. Buck proves his love by obeying Thornton when he commands Buck to jump over a cliff. At the last second, Buck is saved. Twice Buck saves Thornton's life, once by defending him from a bully and again

by rescuing him from drowning. Finally, Buck wins a bet for him by breaking a sled from the ice and dragging its heavy load one hundred yards.

Chapter 7: The Sounding of the Call

The money won from the bet allows Thornton to fulfill his dream of searching for a lost gold mine. When they eventually find it, the men work the mine and Buck has a chance to explore the wild. He even brings down a wounded moose by stalking it for days. When Buck comes back to the camp he finds the men and dogs massacred by the Yeehats. He takes his revenge on the tribe, killing the greatest predator of all, man.

With Thornton's death breaking his last tie to humanity, Buck joins his ancient ancestors, the wolves. With the Yeehats, he gains a reputation as the Ghost Dog, but each year he visits Thornton's grave. This is his only concession to the past.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Buck is a 140-pound, 4-year-old dog living in the Santa Clara Valley of California. His life at Judge Miller's place is filled with hunting with the Judge's sons, protectively walking with the Judge's daughters, playing with the Judge's grandsons and generally watching over the entirety of the Judge's estate, the place he was born. While there are other dogs on the estate, he remains aloof from them because of his dignity, strength and size. Buck's life changes completely when news of a gold strike in the Yukon creates a market for large dogs to pull sleds over the snow and ice to the gold fields.

Buck has always been treated kindly and believes that humans know more than he does and that they have his best interests at heart. He doesn't know that Manuel, one of the Judge's gardeners, needs money to pay a gambling debt. On a day when the Judge is away, Manuel puts a rope around Buck's neck and leads him through the orchard to meet a man who will buy Buck for use as a sled dog in the Yukon.

Buck is completely surprised when his new owner twists the rope so tightly that he can't breathe. He has never been treated like this and tries to fight back, but the man tightens the rope until Buck passes out. When he regains consciousness, he finds himself in the baggage car of a train. He knows where he is because he had traveled with the Judge in the past. Buck suffers greatly in the baggage car. His throat hurts from the twisted rope and his attempts to free himself.

Eventually he is unloaded from the train. The rope is removed from his neck, and he is housed in a crate inside a shed. For a while, he brightens up when he hears the shed door open, thinking it will be the Judge or one of his sons come to take him home. This hope dies when his only visitors are rough men who poke sticks into the crate to enrage him. When Buck sees that the men want him to react this way, he becomes sullen and lies down. The crate is soon put on a wagon and then on another train. During the entire ordeal, Buck has nothing to eat or drink. He is relieved when the men remove the rope from his neck, and he promises himself that he will never accept another. Buck is transformed during his journey; he is no longer the peaceful dog that had lived with the Judge. He has become a "raging fiend."

His crate is unloaded in Seattle, and he is turned over to a man wearing a red sweater. Buck realizes this man is the next in a series of tormentors. Buck throws himself at the bars of his crate, but the man just smiles and hacks the wooden crate apart with a hatchet to let Buck out. Buck rushes at the opening, growling and snarling. When the man in the red sweater succeeds in making an opening big enough for Buck's body to get through, he picks up a club. Buck hurls himself through the opening, enraged and ready to bite. Just as Buck is about to reach the man, the man hits him with the club for the first time.

Buck had never been hit with a club, and he doesn't understand what happened. He attacks the man again, and again the man clubs him to the ground. Buck continues to charge the man a dozen times, and he is slammed with the club every time. When Buck finally staggers toward the man, covered in blood, the man deliberately hits him directly on his nose. This causes the most horrible pain of all. Buck rushes the man one last time, but the man deals him the strongest blow yet and knocks Buck unconscious.

When Buck's senses return, the man speaks to him, telling him that now he knows his place. If he is "good," then he won't be hurt anymore, but if he is "bad," then he'll receive another beating. The man pats Buck on the head as he speaks. Buck endures the petting and drinks the water the man brings for him. He eats the food the man gives him as well. Buck knows he is beaten, but he is not "broken." He realizes that he has no chance against the club. He learned his first lesson in the world of primitive law, and he accepts the facts of his new life with courage and "all the latent cunning" of his nature.

Other dogs join Buck as the days go by. He watches the man in the red sweater beat them into submission. Buck comes to understand that the man with a club must be obeyed, but he doesn't have to like him. Buck never becomes one of the dogs that fawn over the man, wagging their tails and licking his hand. Buck watches as one dog dies rather than submit to the rule of the club.

One day a man speaking poor English comes to the shed. He recognizes the greatness in Buck and buys him for $300. The man delivers dispatches for the Canadian Government, and he knows the value of a good dog on the trail. He also buys a Newfoundland named Curly before joining his partner and other dogs on a ship that is traveling north. This was the last Buck saw of the man with the red sweater, but he never forgot him.

Buck and Curly meet two other dogs on the ship that are going north with the men. One is a big white dog from Spitzbergen. Buck finds him to be "friendly in a treacherous sort of way." The other is an unfriendly and gloomy dog named Dave who just wants to be left alone. These dogs are more experienced than Buck and Curly and laugh at them when they react to the ship's rocking or show fear at the howl of a storm at sea.

The weather grows colder and colder as the ship sails north. It is snowing when the ship finally docks at their destination. Buck has never seen snow before and watches it with wonder. Onlookers laugh at him and his response to the snow, and he feels ashamed.

Chapter 1 Analysis

On the surface, this is a story about a dog, but the way Buck and his companions are described tells the reader that there are deeper levels to be understood as well. For example, the reader knows that Buck is no ordinary dog. The first sentence refers to the fact that Buck didn't read the newspapers. This would not have to be said about an ordinary dog; an ordinary dog would not be expected to read newspapers. The phrase establishes Buck's extraordinarily human attributes. In fact, his attributes are not those

of an ordinary man, but of a "ruler" and a "king." He is "dignified," "has pride in himself," is even "egotistical." He has lived in the Santa Clara Valley as a "sated aristocrat" and a "country gentleman." These traits make the beatings he receives later even more terrible. The other dogs in the chapter are also described in human terms: Spitz is "friendly" but "treacherous" and Dave is "gloomy." Both of these dogs "laugh" at Buck. The dogs of the story have human-like personalities, which allows the reader to identify more closely with their sufferings and triumphs.

Contrasted to the civilized traits of Buck are the traits of the men who betray him. Manuel is an "undesirable companion" with a "weakness" for gambling, a thief who betrays Buck's trust by selling him to a gruff stranger who controls him by choking him. Buck has never been treated this way – like an animal – in his life, and his anger grows as he is shunted from one container to another like ordinary cargo. When he faces the man in the red sweater, he still believes he can impose his will on the world. He learns the terrible first lesson of this primitive world of men: that a man with a club is a lawgiver and a master who must be obeyed. He manages to retain some of his core being by refusing to be "conciliatory" to the master. The man in the red sweater is a violent lawmaker whose image is contrasted with that of Judge Miller, who is a civilized lawmaker. These men represent the two kinds of law.

The philosophical underpinnings of the story derive from Socialism, social Darwinism and Nietzscheism. The subjugation of the weak by the strong is a major theme introduced in the first chapter. Buck's story can be read as symbolic of the struggles of oppressed populations that must submit to the will of their masters. Buck is essentially kidnapped and sold into slavery. However, Buck also represents the refusal of the oppressed to be cowed. The man in the red sweater represents laws enforced through violence. Such laws must be obeyed if one is to survive, but Buck's refusal to fawn over the man or lick his hand represents a core of rebellion at the heart of the slave.

The Darwinian concept of "survival of the fittest" is a recurrent theme throughout the story as well. Darwin believed that only the strongest and most well adapted creatures survived in the world. Herbert Spencer applied this concept to human societies in the 1870s under the label "social Darwinism." According to Spencer, societies are evolving and will eventually become more peaceful and just. The process of evolution may be cruel, violent and slow, but it will ultimately be worthwhile. Expanding business and corporate interests at the time Jack London wrote this story used the idea of social Darwinism to justify their less than benevolent actions.

Jack London's difficult early life and his experiences as what he termed a "work beast" in various jobs prompted his embrace of Socialism. The same experiences prompted his commitment to and belief in individualism as well as his support for the solidarity and cooperation promised by socialism. The interplay of these two ideas, individualism and cooperation are key to the story and symbolized by the sled dog team. The dogs must cooperate to pull the sled efficiently and keep themselves from being whipped or clubbed. This is an example of enlightened self-interest. The dogs also fight to maintain the individuality that is also necessary for their survival.

Also important to a reading of the story is Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the "will to power." Nietzsche believed that the will to power was more basic in creatures than the instinct for self-preservation. He felt it was the basis for all actions, good and bad, including physical violence, domination and love. With these influences in mind, the story becomes much more than the tale of a sled dog in the Yukon.

The mythical theme of the hero on a quest is also apparent in the story as Buck is transformed from a pet into a dog that can live on his own in the wilderness and survive as nature and his ancestors intended. He reclaims his "kingdom" after suffering terrible pain and loss along the way. He triumphs over adversity and becomes his true self.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Buck and the other dogs arrive at Dyea beach where their first days are described as a nightmare. Buck is forced to acknowledge that his lazy life in the sun-filled Santa Clara Valley is over. It has been replaced with an environment that offers no peace, rest or safety. He must be constantly alert for savage attacks from dogs and men.

He receives a hard lesson about the wild and savage nature of the dogs on Dyea beach when Curly, the dog that traveled with him from Seattle, attempts to make friends with a husky near their camp. The dog attacks Curly immediately and rips her face open. Then thirty to forty other huskies circle the two fighting dogs, and once Curly is down, close in on her and kill her. It happens suddenly and with no sense of fair play, shocking Buck to his core. When Buck sees Spitz laughing at Curly's death, he begins to hate him then and there.

Immediately after Curly's death, Buck is put into the traces that harness him to the sled. He had seen harnesses put on horses before, and he has seen horses work, but he never thought that he would one day become a beast of burden. This is another shock to his dignity, but he has become wiser and does not rebel. Francois uses a whip to train Buck, but Buck finds his use of the weapon to be fair. Dave and Spitz, experienced sled dogs, have a role in Buck's training as well. Buck is smart and learns quickly, which pleases Francois.

On the same day, Francois' partner Perrault arrives with two additional dogs for the team, Billee and Joe. Buck receives the additions in a friendly manner, while Dave ignores them, and Spitz fights with both of them. Billee tries appeasing Spitz to no avail. Joe takes the opposite approach and fights back with a vengeance, eventually forcing Spitz, the team leader, to stop his attempts to discipline him. Another dog joins the team in the evening, Sol-leks. This dog is similar to Dave, and he asks for and expects nothing from anyone. He is blind in one eye, which Buck learns by inadvertently triggering an attack when he approaches the dog on his blind side.

That night, Buck is cold and can't sleep. He doesn't know how to get warm in his new and extremely cold environment. First, he tries to get into the tent with Francois and Perrault, but they curse at him and throw things at him until he gives up trying. He decides to see how the other dogs in his team handle the problem. When he returns to the place he had left them, they are nowhere to be found. Then, he discovers Billee curled up in a ball inside a hole dug into the snow. Buck digs a similar hole and finds that he can be comfortable and warm inside it. In the morning, Buck wakes completely covered in snow that had fallen during the night. At first, he is afraid and doesn't know where he is, but then he fights his way out of the hole and finds himself in camp. Francois again comments on how smart a dog Buck is and how quickly he learns.

Francois and Perrault add three more dogs to their team that day for a total of nine. After harnessing all the dogs, they start to deliver the dispatches for the Canadian Government. Buck is glad to leave Dyea beach, and while he finds the work to be hard, he doesn't mind it. He notices that the entire team of dogs is eager and alert, glad to have something to do. The change in behavior is especially noticeable in Dave and Sol-leks, who are proud of their ability to do the job and want everything to go well. They dislike anything that gets in the way of their work.

Buck is placed between Dave and Sol-leks because these two are the most experienced dogs. They take on the training of Buck and see to it that he becomes a useful member of the team. They teach him what do to with a series of nips and bites. Buck again learns quickly what is expected of him. The team travels past the timberline, across glaciers, and snowdrifts, and across the Chilcoot Divide. They pass a series of lakes and finally reach a large camp at Lake Bennett. Here thousands of gold miners are building boats to be used when the ice broke up in the spring.

The next day the team makes forty miles because the snow on the trail was packed down and easy to travel. After that day, they make fewer miles because they must break trail themselves. Perrault generally goes ahead of the team in a pair of snowshoes to make the trail breaking a little easier for the dogs.

Day after day, Buck works with the other dogs from dawn to dusk. He never has enough food to eat and becomes very hungry. Buck receives a pound and a half of dried salmon per day, while the other dogs, smaller and accustomed to the work, receive a pound. Buck begins the trip as a "dainty eater," but soon learns that if he doesn't wolf down his food like the other dogs, they will steal his ration from him. He learns how to get more to eat by watching the dog, Pike, who steals bacon from Perrault when he isn't looking. Buck tries the trick himself and gets away with it. A less cunning dog is blamed for his theft.

With the first theft of food, Buck establishes himself as fit to survive in the harsh environment to which he has been brought. It shows he can adapt to changing conditions, but it also indicates a loosening of his more "civilized" nature. Morality was fine in the southland, but it is a liability in the north. The law of club and fang rules the northland. At Judge Miller's, Buck would have fought for a "moral consideration," but the man in the red sweater taught him a more primitive and basic code of behavior. He does not steal for enjoyment, but because he is hungry, and he stole secretly and with cunning because he respects the club and fang.

Buck quickly becomes stronger and adapts to his environment in every way. His senses become more acute, and he learns how to break ice to get the water he needs to survive. He learns to sleep where the wind won't find him. He begins to remember a time before he was born when wild dogs ranged through the wilderness in packs. He begins to howl at the sky at night, and his howling links him ever more strongly to his wild ancestors. He becomes more of what he was born to be because men discovered gold in the Yukon and because a gardener needed money.

Chapter 2 Analysis

The theme of survival of the fittest and the contrast between civilized and primitive society are amplified in the second chapter. Curly's death is the clearest indication for Buck about the nature of his new environment. He must remain alert and ready for danger at all times or die. The codes he lived by at Judge Miller's – fair play and friendliness – will not help him here. His transfer from the home of a judge, an interpreter of civilized law, to the ownership of Francois and Perrault, who enforce primitive law with a whip and club, emphasize the change that has occurred for Buck. The law as enforced by the more experienced dogs at Dyea beach and on Buck's team also force Buck's quick adaptation to his new environment. Buck recognizes that Francois is fair in his use of the whip; however, as he acknowledges the necessity of the bites he receives from Dave and Sol-leks when teaching him his duties on the sled team. Buck still believes in the fundamental fairness of law until his first theft. Then he recognizes that secrecy and cunning are more important to his future survival than fair play. Fairness and openness are luxuries he cannot afford on the trail that is taking him further and further away from civilization.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Buck becomes increasingly cunning in his behavior. He avoids fights, but his hatred for Spitz increases as the dog continues to goad him. Spitz recognizes Buck as a real threat to his leadership and takes every opportunity to initiate a fight.

After a particularly hard day on the trail, Buck digs his sleep hole before Francois has doled out the food ration. He doesn't want to leave the warmth of the nest to get the food when it finally appears, but he must obey his hunger. When he returns he finds Spitz in his hole. While he has avoided fighting the dog up to this point, this latest affront prompts Buck to attack Spitz furiously, surprising both the husky and Francois, who encourages Buck to make a stand.

In the middle of their fight, the entire team is attacked by a pack of starving huskies from a nearby Indian village. The team has never seen dogs this wild; they behave like wolves, and starvation has made them even wilder. All the team dogs move to defend their camp and their food. While Buck attacks one of the wild dogs, Spitz takes the opportunity to slash Buck from the side. Francois and Perrault run to protect the team dogs, but while they are with the team, the wild dogs overrun the campsite looking for food. The men must leave the team and return to the camp to try to save their supplies. The nine team dogs eventually run the strangers off, and then gather to assess their injuries. They limp back into camp to find that the starving dogs have eaten everything they could, including Perrault's moccasins and part of the whip Francois uses when he drives the team. Francois and Perrault fear that some of the wild dogs may have been mad dogs, and they worry that the disease could have been passed to the team dogs during the fight.

After the attack, the team continues its journey. For six days, they work very hard to make a total of thirty miles. Perrault, who is breaking trail, repeatedly falls through the ice of the river they are following and must stop to build a fire and dry off so he won't freeze to death. With the temperature at fifty below zero, the whole team breaks through the ice and nearly drowns. By the time they reach their target camp, Buck and the rest of the team are completely worn out. They are behind schedule, however, and Perrault needs them to press on. They make thirty-five to forty miles per day for the next three days. Buck's feet show the stress and strain, and Francois uses the tops of his own moccasins to make four moccasins to protect Buck's feet until they toughen up.

One day, the mad dog disease that Francois feared becomes apparent in Dolly. She howls long and hard and begins to chase Buck with a fury that frightens him. He runs through the forest to get away from her and tries to ford the river in his fear. Francois ultimately catches up with the two dogs and kills Dolly with an ax blow to the head. As Buck recovers from the chase, Spitz takes advantage of his fatigue to attack him, biting

him badly before Francois and Perrault intervene. From this point on, Buck and Spitz conduct an all-out war, and they know that a final battle for leadership is inevitable.

Buck waits patiently for his chance to take the leadership role from Spitz. He wants to be the leader because it is in his nature and because he has learned to take pride in the work as Dave and Sol-leks taught him. Spitz is also proud of his work with the team, which he shows by attacking dogs he feels don't pull their weight. One morning after a heavy snowfall, the dog Pike refuses to get out of his sleep nest, enraging Spitz. When Spitz tries to attack Pike, however, Buck puts himself between the two dogs, challenging Spitz's authority. Francois steps in to stop their fight, but in the following days, Buck continues to interfere with Spitz when the men are not around.

Buck starts a rebellion among the other dogs and encourages them to challenge Spitz by refusing to work efficiently. They begin to steal his food, and they fight among themselves continually, breaking down the team's discipline. Francois knows that Buck is behind the rebellion, but the dog is too smart to be caught in his sabotage.

On one moonlit night, Buck leads the team and some fifty other dogs from a neighboring camp in a chase after a snowshoe rabbit. As he leads the pack, Buck's primitive nature is aroused, and he feels nothing but the ecstasy of living, of being caught up in the excitement of the hunt. Spitz has not run with the pack, however, and as they come around a bend, the husky jumps out in front of them and snatches the rabbit, breaking its back in mid-air. At the sound of the dying rabbit, the pack howls in delight. Buck does not join in the celebration of the kill, but continues to run until he reaches Spitz. The two dogs begin to fight to the death for the leadership role.

With his primitive nature aroused, Buck remembers ancestral battles from the past. He knows instinctively what to do while fighting Spitz, who has more experience as a fighter. Spitz jumps and turns quickly, taking himself away from Buck's jaws just at the last moment. The dogs battle as the pack dogs circle them, waiting eagerly for the end. Buck eventually discovers a way to fake a move toward Spitz's throat and then bites somewhere else when Spitz tries to defend himself. Using this strategy, Buck begins to dominate in the fight. Buck's jaws close on one of Spitz's legs, and it breaks, forcing the dog down. Buck breaks another of Spitz's legs, and the husky is all but totally incapacitated. Spitz never stops fighting, though, and as he struggles to rise, the pack closes in on him. The pack takes advantage of his weakness and kills him. Buck watches from the sidelines as the pack finishes what he began. He has succeeded in removing his rival, and he feels good about it.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The third chapter continues the Darwinian theme: only the fittest creatures survive on the hard trail of the northland. As the team moves farther and farther away from civilization, primitive law becomes more evident and important. The chapter's events lead to the climactic final battle between Buck and Spitz for domination and leadership, and the reader knows that the best-adapted dog will win.

The chapter describes the harshness of the landscape, the cold, and freezing river, the sheer fatigue of traveling along the trail. It also introduces the idea that the dogs take pride in their work, which highlights the human qualities of the dogs. The dog team is a symbol of human workers who also take pride in the nobility of work.

The fight with the wild dogs from the Indian camp and the subsequent madness of Dolly show the constant and unknowable dangers that face the team on its journey. Their trip takes on a mythic quality as they face and overcome these obstacles while traveling further and further into the dark forest.

The final battle between Spitz and Buck shows how well Buck has adapted. He has become patient. He waits for his chance to take revenge and to overthrow the top dog. He uses the pack mentality of the other dogs to subvert Spitz's leadership and challenge his power. The relationship between Spitz and Buck symbolizes the relationship of the oppressed with their masters, while the pack's behavior shows how such populations wait for a leader to show them the way. Buck earns his leadership by using both his primitive nature and his human-like qualities to defeat his enemy. Buck's supremacy indicates that he come closer toward accepting individualism.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Francois understands what has happened when Spitz doesn't appear in camp the next morning. As the men make ready to harness the dogs, Buck steps into the place Spitz had previously occupied. Francois tries to put more experienced sled dog in that position, but Buck refuses to join the team until the man relents and harnesses him in the leader's spot.

Francois is surprised when Buck excels in his new role. Buck is particularly good at making the other dogs follow the rules he establishes. During the time that Buck and Spitz had been fighting, the team had become undisciplined and inefficient. Now that Buck had succeeded in becoming the leader, he loses no time enforcing his rules. The team makes excellent time on the trail under Buck's leadership, and the men are happy as they travel at record speed along the trail. Every day for two weeks, the team averages forty miles, and when they break the record for that part of the trail, the crowd in Skaguay, their destination, cheers them and celebrates their accomplishment.

In Skaguay, however, Francois and Perrault receive orders from the government to leave. They must turn Buck and the dog team over to another owner. This team along with several other dog teams is taken to Dawson on a difficult trip by their new drivers. Buck does not like what has happened, but he continues to take pride in his work and does his job well. The job is monotonous and consists of traveling back and forth over the same route, trip after trip, as the new owner delivers the mail. Buck fights his way to supremacy among all the dogs along the way and is left alone after a few fierce battles cement his reputation as a fierce fighter.

Buck's favorite thing to do during this period is to lie near the campfire and stare into the flames, giving him up to memory. He remembers Judge Miller's house and the man in the red sweater who taught him the law of the club. He remembers Curly's death and the fight with Spitz. More often, however, Buck has memories from a time when his ancestors sat by the fires of primitive men. He remembers the actions of these hairy men and the way his ancestors hunted with them. These memories become part of Buck's nature and he continues his transformation into a "primordial beast."

The constant travel takes a toll on the dogs, particularly Dave who has developed some type of internal injury that the men cannot diagnose or cure. Dave's pride does not allow him to rest, however, and he continues to pull the sled until he is too weak to stand. The man driving the team takes Dave out of the harness, thinking to let him run freely behind the sled and have some rest. Dave is broken-hearted at being taken out of his place on the team, however, and he tries to get into the traces as the sled travels, crying with grief at losing his place. Dave refuses to run quietly behind the sled and finally falls. With his last vestiges of strength, Dave manages to follow the team until it makes a stop and then goes to the side of Sol-leks, the dog that has taken his place. The driver

recognizes the pride Dave has and finally unhitches Sol-leks, putting Dave back in the traces so he can die the way he wants. Although Dave stumbles and falls throughout the day, he manages to keep up until they make camp that night. In the morning, he tries to take his place again, dragging his body by his forelegs, but he can't reach the sled. The last his team mates see is how he gasps in the snow behind them on the trail, straining to move his body forward, and howling until they are out of sight. When the team reaches a stopping point, the driver walks back on the trail toward where Dave fell, and then the team hears a gunshot. The driver returns and the sled moves forward, with every dog knowing what happened back behind the trees.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Buck demands the role of leader of the team and will not allow Francois to appoint another dog to the position. Buck dominates the humans as well as the dogs on the team now. He understands that without the dog team's strength and energy, the men would be lost. The combination of his wild qualities and his human attributes force Francois to acknowledge him as the ruler of his environment. By taking over Spitz's position, Buck has become the lawgiver who must be obeyed.

The disability and death of Dave illustrates the dog's endurance and nobility. His pride will not allow him to give up, and his commitment to the team will not allow him to let them down. Dave's suffering has ennobled him, and even with his death, he remains a powerful example for the rest of the team.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Thirty days after they leave Dawson, Buck and the team arrive at Skaguay completely worn out. Buck has lost a considerable amount of weight, and several of the dogs are limping. When they reach the town all they want to do is take advantage of the rest period they believe awaits them. After covering 1,200 miles, even the humans on the team expect some rest. However, because of the increased amount of mail coming into the gold strike areas, the teams must keep moving. Dogs that cannot immediately go out on the trail again must be sold.

After three days, Hal and Charles, newcomers to the northland, purchase Buck. The newcomers have a woman with them, Charles's wife and Hal's sister, Mercedes. It is clear that these people have no idea what they are doing. Buck knows they are trouble as soon as he sees their camp, which is disorganized and slovenly. Everything about their equipment is wrong, but the men are confident that they know best.

Experienced trail drivers try to give them advice on what to take and what to leave, but the men disregard all their comments. They believe their sled won't move because the dogs need to be whipped harder and not because it is overloaded. The experienced men finally succeed in making the newcomers understand they must lighten their load. With much argument and wailing from the woman, items are dumped from the sled until it carries a more manageable weight. This load still requires the addition of several dogs to haul it, and the newcomers purchase several inexperienced dogs. They now have fourteen dogs and congratulate themselves on the size of their team. Experienced men know that it is impossible to carry enough food to maintain fourteen dogs on the trail, but the newcomers don't want to hear any more advice.

Buck leads the newcomers' team out of town with little enthusiasm. He knows he cannot trust these people to make the right decisions on the trail. At first, the dogs are overfed because the humans pity their condition. The dogs needed rest, however, and not food, but the newcomers are anxious to move quickly before the river ice thaws. Since there was overfeeding at the beginning of the trip, the time eventually comes when the food must be rationed severely. Then the dogs are underfed.

The combination of poor feeding, lack of rest, and the overloaded sled takes a toll on the dogs. One by one, they die. All the civilized gentility of the newcomers from the south drops away by the time the company loses seven of its dogs. The woman stops crying over the dogs' treatment, and the men begin to quarrel with each other. Everyone is irritable, sore and tired, and they argue over meaningless things.

Mercedes rides on the sled, refusing to walk beside it even when it becomes clear that the dogs are having a difficult time. The men forcibly remove her from the sled at one point, whereupon she simply sits where they placed her by the trail and cries until they

return to retrieve her, putting her back on the sled again. The humans' own suffering makes them impervious to the suffering of the dogs, and they resort to beating them frequently to make them move faster.

Buck staggers on in his role as the leader, pulling when he can and falling down in the traces when he can't. No blow from the club or the whip can induce him to move when he reaches this point. The six other dogs behave the same way. All are starved and worn out from toil. When several of the remaining dogs can no longer rise, they are shot one by one. Buck can no longer enforce discipline among the dogs; he is weak and can barely feel his feet any longer. The weather has warmed and it is a beautiful spring, but neither the humans nor the dogs can enjoy it. The dogs fall, Mercedes cries, and the men swear as they pull into John Thornton's camp on the White River.

The humans sit down to rest at the camp, and John Thornton listens to their tale of woe. He gives advice when asked, but he knows it will not be followed. The men brag about how they had made it to the White River despite the people who had said they could never do it. Thornton comments that only fools with fools' luck could have made it. Thornton tells them they shouldn't try to cross the ice now, since it has already begun to get mushy. The men don't listen and try to rouse the team, which has collapsed from exhaustion. The team refuses to rise, and Hal whips the dogs until they slowly get up. Buck, however, is steadfast in his refusal to go further. He has a feeling of impending doom about the attempt to cross the ice, and for the first time, he does not rise. Hal beats him without mercy, but Buck no longer cares. He has suffered so much that the blows from the man no longer have an effect on him. He feels nothing.

John Thornton, who has watched the beating, has had enough, and rushes the man with the whip. He tells Hal that if he hits Buck one more time, he will kill him. Thornton stands between Hal and the dog, even when Hal threatens him with his large hunting knife. Thornton hits Hal on the knuckles with an ax handle, forcing him to drop the knife. Hal has no fight left in him, and he watches as Thornton cuts the traces and takes Buck off the sled team. A few minutes later, the team pulls out across the ice without Buck, who watches as a hole opens in the ice and swallows the entire team.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Despite their good work at hauling the mail, neither the men nor the dogs are given any respect or chance to rest. The law has come down, and everyone must obey. This is example of how law impacts lives and disrupts them. The men must obey instructions from the government and must get rid of the dogs. The dogs are at the mercy of their owners and must go to new ones when money changes hands. The only expression of free will or individualism left for the dogs is their commitment to the work and the pride they have in their own contributions. The cooperation of the team is again forced to take a blow from external forces that can destroy it.

Hal, Charles and Mercedes are examples of the worst civilization can offer. They personify ignorance and arrogance, and they present a strong contrast to the

practicality, craft and pride of the experienced sled drivers and their teams. They have come from the "civilized" world, and they think they will show these rough frontiersmen how things should be done. Their attempts at outfitting their sled may be laughable, but the reader knows that their trip cannot end well. Their petty arguments and inability to cooperate contrast sharply with the discipline of the dog team. The foreshadowing of tragedy is evident in every decision the "civilized" humans make. Their disregard of the laws of the wilderness that govern the northland results in their deaths.

Buck avoids the fate of the other dogs because he is true to himself and trusts his "primitive" instincts. He won't lead the team into the danger he knows lurks on the melting ice. His refusal get up regardless of how hard Hal beats him also represents the final freedom available to a slave: he chooses to die rather than work for the master any longer. Buck's action here mirrors that of the dog who refused to submit to the man in the red sweater and who died because of his decision. Buck does not have to die, however; John Thornton saves him.

John Thornton represents the best of humanity in the wilderness. He understands the situation as soon as he sees the condition of the dogs when Hal, Charles and Mercedes come into his camp. He believes in an individual's right to make his own mistakes, however, and remains aloof from these people. He knows they are too foolish to listen to him, and he refuses to waste his energy on them. When Hal beats Buck, however, Thornton must act. The "inhumanity" of the act enrages him, and he saves Buck from certain death.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

John Thornton had frozen his feet the previous winter and stayed in the camp by the river to recuperate while his partners took a raft to Dawson. He is still limping when he rescues Buck from Hal. Buck is allowed to recuperate with Thornton, laying by the river during long spring days, watching the water and the birds and regaining his strength. He becomes lazy after his long period toil with the sleds. Thornton has two other dogs: Skeet and Nig, both friendly. Skeet takes on the role of nurse for Buck and tends his wounds regularly. Buck is surprised that the dogs are so friendly and accepting of him. They invite him to play games, and sometimes Thornton himself joins in the games, which reminds Buck of his leisurely days with Judge Miller's sons.

Thornton treats his dogs as if they are his children. He speaks to them each time he sees them and pets them frequently. As Buck regains his strength, he follows Thornton wherever he goes. He is the first human to inspire love in Buck, and he does so by appreciating Buck for what he is. For Buck, the expression of love is related to pain, and he shows his love for Thornton by grabbing his hand with his teeth just hard enough to leave an impression in the skin. Buck is not overly demonstrative in his affection and never asks for attention. His relationship with Thornton is one of equals. Buck's serves Thornton because he chooses to do so. He doesn't steal from Thornton, but he continues to steal from other men in other camps. Only Thornton can put a pack on Buck's back, and nothing Thornton asks of him is too great a task. Buck is faithful and devoted to Thornton, but retains a core of wildness and cunning.

Buck has learned that he must be the master of other dogs or be a slave, and he knows which role he wants. The ghosts of ancient wolf dog ancestors haunt him at Thornton's fireside, and he hears the call of a howling wolf in the forest with a strong recognition.

Thornton is slow to recognize the power he has over Buck because of Buck's love for him. He carelessly commands Buck to jump over a cliff one day, and then must to rush to stop him from throwing himself over the edge when Buck doesn't hesitate to follow his order. Thornton makes a bet with men in town that Buck can pull a sled weighing a thousand pounds, and Buck wins the bet for him out of love. Thornton is flabbergasted that Buck will do anything for him and feels ashamed that he asked him to do such foolish things. Buck's effort brings him to tears, and though men offer him large amounts of money for Buck, Thornton refuses to let him go.

As Thornton saved Buck's life, Buck saves Thornton's life on several occasions. They are equals in the wilderness, joined by love.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Thornton is the human equivalent of Buck. They have both adapted to the environment ruled by primitive law while retaining the best of civilization: care for others. The chapter shows how love overcomes the brutality of their world. Buck, the "primordial beast" actually teaches the power of love to Thornton through his willingness to do anything that is asked of him. Thornton deserves Buck's love because he cares enough about "primitive" beasts to interact with them in their world. Buck brings out the best in Thornton, as shown by the man's refusal to sell the dog for any amount of money in an environment where greed rules. Their relationship is a relationship of equals and an example of how societal relationships should be. There should be no forced labor or violently imposed law, but only labor that is willingly performed for the good of all and law that is equally applied. When all parties have respect for one another, great things can be accomplished.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Buck's successful hauling of the 1,000-pound sled earns $1600 for John Thornton in just a few minutes. The money allows Thornton and his partners to pay their debts and to begin a journey to a lost mine thought to be somewhere in the East. Many men had looked for the mine but few had discovered it. The mine was the stuff of legend and mystery, and no living man had been able to find it and take its treasure.

John Thornton, Pete, Hans, and Buck and six other dogs pack up and travel eastward on an unknown trail. Thornton is not afraid to go into uncharted country. All he needs is a rifle and some salt, and he can live off the land as he travels. He is in no hurry, and he can afford to hunt for his food.

Buck loves this way of living. He likes the hunting and fishing and wandering through new places. The dogs and men travel through the spring and into the summer, moving back and forth on faint trails. They see summery valleys and naked mountains with unending snow. They winter in uncharted lands, and when spring returns, they still had not found the Lost Cabin, but only a valley where gold was plentiful in the streams. They establish a camp there and begin to collect gold dust and nuggets. They store their gold in sacks stacked up like firewood. The dogs have nothing to do while the men are panning for gold. Sometimes they haul the game Thornton kills for food. Buck spends long hours with Thornton, watching the fire, and thinking about his vision of the hairy ape-man of long ago.

In Buck's prehistoric visions, the hairy man always seemed afraid. He was always alert for danger and leapt up into the trees when he sensed it closing in on him, his dog companion lying below. The more Buck thinks about his vision, the more he feels an irresistible urge to run through the forest. He learns to be a patient hunter and is willing to lie for hours watching his prey. He especially loves to run during the nights when the midnight sun creates twilight in the wilderness. He hears a call from the forest, a long howling unlike any sound made by the dogs he knew, yet familiar to him. He runs toward the source of the howling and finds a timber wolf with his nose pointed at the sky.

Buck approaches noiselessly, but the wolf stops howling, sensing his presence. Buck walks into the open area in front of the wolf, but the animal runs away at the sight of him. Buck follows the wolf and keeps up his friendly demeanor. Eventually the wolf and Buck touch noses, and the wolf realizes Buck is a friend. They run through the woods together and into ever wilder country than Buck had left behind. Buck feels joy in running with the wolf. All his ancestral memories return, and he knows he is where he should be. When he and the wolf stop at a stream to drink, however, Buck suddenly remembers John Thornton, and his love for the man compels him to return to Thornton's camp, abandoning his "wolf brother."

Buck stays in camp for two days and nights, never leaving Thornton's side. Eventually his restlessness returns and he takes to staying out in the forests for days a time. He had crossed some kind of line, and he knew that he had become wild. He fishes for salmon in the streams and kills a bear for meat. His lust for the kill becomes stronger, and he acknowledges that he is an animal that preys on other living things for its survival. He knows he must survive using the entire ancient cunning and wiliness bred into him. He returns to camp now and then, showing himself to be in peak physical and mental condition. He elicits the admiration of the men who admit they have never seen such a dog as Buck.

In the autumn, moose return to the region, and Buck is determined to hunt and kill one on his own. Buck is patient. He first cuts a bull out from the herd, and harasses it for days until the herd moved on, unwilling to protect one member at the expense of the entire group. Buck keeps the bull from drinking water or eating, watching as the moose becomes weaker and weaker. After four days, Buck kills the moose. He stays with his kill for two days and then again begins to run through the country.

One day he picks up a scent that leads straight back to John Thornton's camp, and he follows it with trepidation. He finds the camp destroyed, the dogs and men victims of an Indian attack and all dead. The Yeehats are dancing in the wreckage when they hear Buck rushing into camp. He attacks them with a violent fury and scares them away. Buck follows them and drags them down as they run through the forest.

Buck follows Thornton's scent to the edge of a deep pool where it stops. Buck stays by the pool and in the camp for a day. He knows Thornton is as dead as the bodies that lay around him. His last tie to civilization has been broken. He himself has killed men. He was surprised at how easily this was done. Without their clubs, guns or spears, men were nothing to fear.

When the moon rises full over the country, Buck comes alive to the forest sounds. He hears yelps in the distance and follows the sounds to an open space where he recognizes again the call of the wolves. The Yeehats and the wolves are both following the moose herd as it travels into Buck's valley. Buck waits for the wolves, and when they see him, several attempt to attack him. He stands his ground and slashes them with his teeth. The whole pack comes toward him, intent on bringing him down, but Buck uses strategy to position himself where they can't attack him from behind. His actions confuse the wolves, which hold back, until one of them advances in a friendly way. Buck recognizes the animal as his "wolf brother." When an older wolf comes to sniff Buck's nose, the tension is broken. The pack accepts Buck, and he runs with them, side by side, into the woods.

Tales are later told of the Ghost Dog that runs at the head of a wolf pack. The Yeehats notice changes in the appearance of the timber wolves. The wolves begin to look like Buck. The Yeehats do not go into the valley of the Ghost Dog. This dog is more cunning and stronger than any wolf, they say, and hunters have been killed when they venture into his territory. The stream runs yellow with gold falling out of the rotting leather sacks,

and Buck howls a long and sad sound, then leaves. Buck is the leader of the wolf pack now, and they follow him through the forest sounding the call of a more primitive time.

Chapter 7 Analysis

With Thornton's death, Buck's last tie to civilization is cut. He can now revert to his true nature and follow his primitive vision. Buck's transformation is complete. The wilderness has tested him, nearly killed him and ultimately saved him. He learned to survive like a wild creature, hunting on his own, relying on his own strength to survive. He recognized how weak humans are compared to wild creatures. He learned to kill successively larger prey: salmon, bear, moose and finally men. He is surprised at how easy it is to kill a man and at the satisfaction he receives in doing it. When he meets the wolf brother and is recognized as an equal, he knows this is how his life should be. All the experiences he had to this point represented a prelude to his "real" life. When he finally relinquishes his tenuous connection with the world of humans, Buck chooses the path of individualism. He becomes a legend. He is a hero who has successfully overcome all obstacles, completed all tasks and become himself. He is more than a dog.

Characters

Buck

Half St. Bernard, half Scotch shepherd, Buck is a dog and the protagonist of The Call of the Wild. The novel is told largely from Buck's perspective, although the narrator interprets his "feelings" and "thoughts" for the reader. Buck is a loyal friend to his owner, Judge Miller, and he "lived the life of a sated aristocrat" on his California ranch. But he is physically strong from hunting expeditions, and his thick coat and strength are exactly what the men going North to seek their fortune in the Klondike gold rush need.

Buck is stolen by the gardener and sold to a group traveling north. Before long Buck knows that he is in a strange land with different rules and expectations. A man in a red sweater teaches Buck his first lesson of the Northland: "a man with a club was a law-giver, a master to be obeyed, though not necessarily conciliated." Buck's first masters are just, but he must make a difficult adjustment to his new life of labor and near-starvation. He even steals food from his master, an act which marks "the decay or going to pieces of his moral nature, a vain thing and a handicap in the ruthless struggle for existence." Although Buck is a dog, his "development (or retrogression)," as London calls it, is depicted in almost human terms. He is losing all the trappings of civilization. "The domesticated generations fell from him," and "instincts long dead became alive again."

Buck is more and more drawn to the wild. He discovers the thrill of the blood hunt, and he defeats his rival, Spitz, for the position of lead dog. But when he meets his third master, John Thornton, a strong relationship develops between man and dog. Buck stays with Thornton because he loves him, not because of the "law of the club." He risks his life for Thornton on more than one occasion. Yet he is still attracted by the call of the wild. He meets a wolf, a "brother," and longs to run off with him, but he stays with Thornton. Only when Yeehat Indians murder Thornton does Buck join the wolf pack, becoming the "Ghost Dog" in Yeehat legend. The wolves are greatly feared, and Buck "may be seen running at the head of the pack."

Charles

Charles is one of Buck's masters. He is searching for gold, but his group is completely unprepared for the harsh, demanding environ environment. Through their ignorance, lack of sense, and cruelty, they starve the dogs and nearly work them to death. When they travel on a precarious river trail, they crash through the ice to their deaths.

Dave

Dave is the wheel-dog on the team. His pride in his work is so great that he ends up working himself to death, unwilling to be carried when he becomes ill.

Dolly

Dolly is a dog who goes mad on the trail. She comes after Buck in her madness and is killed by Francois.

Francois

Francois is a dog driver, one of Buck's first masters in the Klondike. He and his partner, Perrault, are mail couriers. They are just masters who treat the dogs fairly, although they get the maximum amount of work out of their dogs with the minimum amount of food.

Hal

Hal is Charles's brother-in-law. When Buck refuses to lead the dogs further on the trail, he beats him severely. Hal is the one who leads the party to their deaths.

Manuel

Manuel is the gardener who steals Buck and sells him.

Mercedes

Mercedes is Hal's wife and Charles's sister. Because she "had been chivalrously treated all her days," she is particularly ill-suited to the life of the trail. She feels sorry for the hungry dogs, so she gives them more to eat, only to have them run out of food. And she refuses to walk, making the exhausted dogs carry her weight on the sled.

Judge Miller

Judge Miller is Buck's original owner on the California ranch.

Perrault

Perrault is Francois's partner and one of Buck's first masters.

Sol-leks

Sol-leks is one of the sled dogs who shows Buck the ropes. He takes great pride in his job, and Francois and Perrault make him lead dog after Spitz's death. But Sol-leks relinquishes his position when Buck claims it. Sol-leks goes down with the team when Charles, Mercedes, and Hal drive them into the thawed river.

Spitz

Spitz is the lead dog of the team, and he is Buck's nemesis. Buck resents his power and intends to challenge him, knowing that it must be a battle to the death. When Buck, in the full frenzy and "ecstasy" of the "blood lust," closes in on a rabbit, and Spitz steps in to claim the prey for his own, Buck attacks Spitz. After a long and bloody fight Buck is the victor, the "dominant primordial beast."

John Thornton

John Thornton is Buck's last master. He intervenes when he sees Hal beating Buck for refusing to go any further on the trail, and he saves the dog's life. Thornton "was the ideal master. Other men saw to the welfare of their dogs from a sense of duty and business expediency; he saw to the welfare of his as if they were his own children." Buck becomes his loyal friend and loves him more than any human or beast he has ever known.

Thornton tests Buck's loyalty by ordering him to jump off a cliff. Only by jumping in front of Buck does he prevent him from plunging to his death. Although Buck is drawn to life in the wild, he remains with Thornton. When his beloved master is killed by Yeehat Indians, Buck avenges Thornton's death, killing his first human; he then leaves the world of men forever. The bond between Buck and Thornton had been Buck's last and strongest tie to civilization.

Setting

The story begins in 1897, at the start of the Klondike gold rush. The discovery of gold in the Klondike—a region in northwestern Canada's Yukon Territory—prompted thousands of goldseekers to head for the far north, all of them desperately in need of dogs to pull sleds across the harsh arctic trails.

Buck, a large dog who has enjoyed a leisurely life on a California ranch, is stolen and shipped to the Yukon. Buck learns to survive in this cruel environment; he begins to discover the primitive instincts of his ancestors, and in time he responds to the call of the wild.

Social Concerns

When Jack London and his brother-in-law headed for the Yukon in 1897, the news of the gold strike had only been known for eleven days. Like thousands of other adventurers, the pair responded immediately to the opportunity to relive the spirit of the frontier, to test their manhood against a hostile environment, and to win the prize of great wealth. Similarly, the atavism of The Call of the Wild answered the nation's desire for an escape from the growing complexity of the modern world.

London's own experience of poverty, grinding factory work, life on the road, and imprisonment had shown him that, for many, life was a brutal struggle for survival. A social Darwinist, influenced by the writings of Herbert Spencer, London was convinced that many of the beaten and degraded people that populated the lower strata of society were there because of hereditary and environmental circumstances effectively beyond their individual control; yet, The Call of the Wild also dramatizes London's belief that the same competitive pressures that brutally eradicate the weak and unlucky can develop the rare, special individual, the Nietzschean superman. Thus, The Call of the Wild encompasses London's contradictory attractions to strength and love, Nietzsche and Marx, individualism and cooperative action, materialism and romanticism.

Social Sensitivity

To audiences who have been entertained by Rambo-style killings, the violence in The Call of the Wild will seem mild. Nevertheless, the ferocity of the dogs is described vividly and powerfully, as London shows "the law of club and fang" in brutal operation.

Because John Thornton is portrayed as such a kindly and fair man, his unexplained murder by the Yeehats comes as a shock. The murder, however, is part of London's social message—human beings, as well as animals, can be awfully savage. Buck's bloodthirsty revenge upon the Yeehats may strike some readers as extreme, but it should inspire discussion about the nature of justice and retribution, and about the values of civilization.

London's belief in environmental determinism permeates this story. While his Darwinian assumptions may not be shared by all readers, his dramatization of these concepts in The Call of the Wild should provoke thoughtful discussion about the extent to which environment determines character.

Techniques

London, who claimed to have learned style from Herbert Spencer's "Philosophy of Style" and praised the plain style of Rudyard Kipling, always maintained that matter should take precedence over form. In his least successful works this desire to write novels of ideas results in fragmented narration and static prose, but in The Call of the Wild London tells his story through action and character, avoiding the impulse to preach.

London believed wholeheartedly in the dictates of realism, maintaining that "A thing must be true, or it is not beautiful"; yet the particular power of The Call of the Wild comes from London's careful progression from the prosaic to the visionary, a stylistic transformation that parallels his protagonist's. Buck's experiences in the Southland of Judge Miller's ranch are described in subdued, matter-of-fact language; his initiation to the merciless violence of the Yukon is portrayed through terse, active statements; and his transformation into the mythical Ghost Dog of the North is described in passages that have been called tone poems. Thus, in The Call of the Wild London's manner skillfully complements and completes the matter.

Literary Qualities

The Call of the Wild exemplifies the features of a turn-of-the-century movement known as literary naturalism: the story is presented realistically and directly, and dramatizes the force of environment in shaping character. The Call of the Wild is widely acclaimed as London's best work of fiction. The author's firm control of the plot and focused point of view give the story its remarkable coherence. London's diction is unusually rich, full of complex and mellifluous words. His style is lean and vigorous, and grows increasingly resonant with mystical overtones near the end of the book.

An often-cited literary precedent to The Call of the Wild is Frank Norris's 1899 novel McTeague. Norris's work traces the downfall of a San Francisco dentist who inevitably destroys himself and those around him when his alcoholism and violent tendencies erupt. Like Norris, London explores the hidden character traits, triggered by interaction with one's environment, that determine an individual's fate.

Many readers have found allegories for human experience in Buck's struggles.

Some see The Call of the Wild as a fable of sorts, for, like Aesop's fables, the novel tells the story of an animal who triumphs through strength and cunning.

Other readers, like critic Earle Labor, describe Buck as a mythic hero who sets out on a perilous adventure, journeys to a mysterious, faraway place, and is thoroughly transformed.

Thematic Overview

The Call of the Wild is a mythic romance, a beast fable, in which the transformation of Buck, the canine protagonist, offers readers a vicarious return to life lived immediately, a life which transcends civilized restraints and regulations. The book's central theme traces the development of a hero through rites of passage that lead to self-knowledge, and the story follows the archetypal pattern of departure, initiation, growth, and apotheosis.

Buck's decivilization is a quest for the essence of life, a journey which begins in the sheltered world of Judge Miller's California ranch, proceeds through brutal confrontations with the natural world of the Yukon, and then leaps beyond to the realm of myth where Buck glories in the unanalyzed "tidal wave of being" that paradoxically brings "the complete forgetfulness that one is alive."

The novella also expresses London's belief that environment and heredity largely control existence, for Buck's transformation is conditioned by experience, the brutal lessons that teach him the "law of club and fang," as well as the hereditary memories of "the eternity behind him," a precivilized time that "throbbed through him in a mighty rhythm." But despite the importance of environment and genetic memory, the key to Buck's greatness is his "imagination," an adaptability that enables him to survive and finally triumph.

The Call of the Wild displays the harshness of the unrelenting struggle for survival with naturalistic clarity, but the book also shows that it is possible for canine and human characters to attain dignity and even nobility in the face of a terrifyingly indifferent world.

They salvage honor from the merciless equation of death, and through their actions point toward the potential for greatness at the heart of life. Although The Call of the Wild is based on many of the same deterministic assumptions as Frank Norris's McTeague (1899), London's novella is not a story of mean, petty greed, but a story in which suffering reveals physical and moral strength.

Themes

Civilization vs. the Wild

The main conflict in *The Call of the Wild* is the struggle between civilization and the wild. The novel traces Buck's gradual transformation from a domesticated dog to a wild one.

Buck has to learn to adapt to an entirely new way of life and code of conduct in order to survive. He must give up his life of leisure and his trusting nature. He learns "the law of the club and fang," meaning that those who have the greatest physical strength are the rulers. The chain of command is comprised of men with clubs; the lead dogs, who have achieved mastery by wounding or killing dogs that challenge them; and the other dogs, who do most of the work.

Buck starts out on the bottom of this hierarchy, but soon adapts to his new life. He begins to steal food, losing his moral nature. Most of all, Buck is fit, and his superior strength, conditioned by his experiences, allows him to be more aggressive. He challenges the lead dog and wins the coveted top position. His survival instinct leads him to refuse to lead the team any further when they travel on thin ice.

At this point in the narrative, Buck's consistent "development (or retrogression)," as London calls it, from civilization to the wild is halted. When Thornton becomes his master, he discovers a stronger bond - love - than any he has ever experienced. His risks his life for his master, in direct contradiction to the new ethos he has learned on the trail. With Thornton, Buck lives a domesticated life, but he continues to hear the call of the wild. Although he is torn between the two, he remains with Thornton, unable to break the bond between them. When Thornton is killed, he is released, finally able to fulfill his true nature and join the wolf pack. Only then is his transformation from domesticated dog to wolf-like wild one complete.

Ancestral Memory

As Buck metamorphoses into a wild creature, he discovers within himself instincts that have been dormant for generations. In *The Call of the Wild,* London glorifies the almost metaphysical element of Buck's nature that allows him to survive in conditions that are completely foreign to him. He does more than learn to adapt, London argues, he draws on his ancestral memory to show him how to behave.

It is this metaphysical aspect of Buck's nature that has led critics to detect a supernaturalist or spiritualist slant to this novel. Even though Buck's experiences determine that he will become wild, leaving civilization behind, after he meets Thornton he is lured back into the domesticated life. Thornton will protect and feed him, treating him more like a beloved member of the family than a mere dog or work animal. Throughout his relationship with Thornton, it is his growing awareness of his ancestral

memory that lures him into the wild. The "call of the wild," therefore, refers to the mystical natural forces at work within Buck, making the story more supernatural.

Style

Point of View

Point of view is the narrative perspective from which a work is presented to the reader. *The Call of the Wild* is told from a very unusual point of view—that of a dog. Yet a human narrator stands outside of Buck's consciousness and makes sense of the dog's universe to human readers. London also tries to maintain Buck's believability as a dog. So while he explains his motivations, London reminds the reader that Buck does not actually think. After a lengthy passage about Buck's moral decline, explaining why Buck steals food from his master, London writes, "Not that Buck reasoned it out.... unconsciously he accommodated himself to the new mode of life."

Setting

Setting is the time, place, and culture in which the action of a narrative takes place. *The Call of the Wild* is neatly divided into two regions that are diametrically opposed—the Southland and the Northland. The former represents civilization and the latter the wild. In the South, Buck lived a domesticated and perfectly stable life. When Buck arrives in the North, he realizes that survival is the only concern.

The difference between the two regions is typified by their climates. In the South, it is warm, food grows easily, and people enjoy their leisure. In the North, the harsh, cold conditions are very dangerous if one is not prepared, and people must work hard and suffer much to survive.

Allegory

Many critics perceive that *The Call of the Wild* was more than the story of a dog. Many believe that it is an allegory about human society. An allegory tells two stories at once: the surface narrative, which in this case would be Buck's transformation; and the "real" story that is suggested by the literal narrative. As such, then, this novel also tells the story of the savagery of man, who is transported into a hostile world against his will, must confront his inability to determine his own fate, must learn to survive by any means necessary, and who must choose between the bond of love with other humans and his own desire to live outside of human connections.

Earle Labor deems *The Call of the Wild* a "beast fable," because it "provoke[s] our interest— unconsciously if not consciously—in the human situation, not in the plight of the lower animals." Charles N. Watson Jr. provides another assessment of this aspect of the novel: "This is not a matter of observing, as some critics have done, that the dog story involves a human 'allegory,' a term implying that Buck is merely a human being disguised as a dog. Rather, the intuition at the heart of the novel is that the process of individuation in a dog, wolf, or a human child are not fundamentally different."

Naturalism

Although there has been much debate about how much *The Call of the Wild* conforms to naturalism, some of the novel's basic ideas are perfect illustrations of the theory. As an outgrowth of realism, naturalism dawned in the 1890s, when writers like Stephen Crane and Frank Norris produced fiction that examined life with scientific objectivity, concluding that biology and socioeconomic factors ruled behavior. While local color and sentimental fiction dominated the literary marketplace at that time, these writers promoted a literature that was "real" and "true" in its depiction of the underside of America's burgeoning cities. Influenced by Darwinist theories of biological determinism, they applied such ideas to society, where the struggle for existence was often brutal and dehumanizing.

Buck's fate is in the hands of men. He is unable to decide his own course of action. London underscores this when he writes that Buck found himself where he was "because men had found a yellow metal in the North, and because Manuel was a gardener's helper whose wages did not lap over the needs of his wife and divers small copies of himself." In other words, circumstances well beyond Buck's control are guiding his life. *The Call of the Wild* perfectly illustrates the doctrines of naturalism because Buck "is a product of biological, environmental, and hereditary forces."

Romanticism

Despite the naturalist elements of *The Call of the Wild,* some scholars also perceive romantic tendencies. Although romanticism as a movement peaked in the mid-nineteenth century in America, its central tenets have always been popular in American fiction. In this style, strict adherence to reality is not important. Rather, setting or characters take on mythic or symbolic proportions. As Buck begins to heed the "call of the wild" he hears through his ancestors, the story becomes less realistic and more mythic.

As Earle Labor and Jeanne Campbell Reesman have argued, the novel is a "mythic romance" because "the call to adventure, departure, initiation, the perilous journey to the mysterious life-center, transformation, and apotheosis: these are ... all present in Buck's progress from the civilized world through the natural and beyond to the supernatural world." Although he starts out as a real character, Buck is transformed into the mythical "Ghost Dog" of Yeehat legend. Likewise, the setting of the Northland begins as a real region and ends up a dreamlike, mythical realm.

Historical Context

The Klondike Gold Rush

Many early settlers in North America had migrated in search of the gold that Spaniards had found in Central and South America. Dreams of a continent paved with gold did not begin to come true until the 1840s, when gold was found in California. In the subsequent decades, gold was found in many regions of the West. Most prospectors that traveled to California never realized their dream. By the 1880s, mining had become big business, making it even more difficult for optimistic individuals to seek their fortunes.

When gold was found in the Klondike region in 1896, part of the Yukon territory of Canada, new dreams were kindled in the minds of many who viewed it as the last opportunity to make it big. This gold rush attracted hoards of people to the Alaska territory, which adjoined the Yukon. This forbidding region had barely been explored, and most had very little idea what to expect. Many were totally unprepared for the harsh conditions, like Charles, Hal, and Mercedes in *The Call of the Wild*. For the first time, towns were established in the interior of Alaska. In 1897, the year Jack London set sail for Alaska, the Klondike yielded $22 million in gold.

Social Darwinism

At the turn of the century, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution was applied to human society by philosophers and a new cadre of social scientists, including Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner. Adapting the notion of natural selection, they argued that life was a struggle for survival and that the "fittest" would come out on top. It was inevitable that only a few individuals would prosper; the rest would suffer in poverty. According to Social Darwinists, these conditions were not only inevitable but a positive process of weeding out those who were unfit, or inferior.

This theory of social evolution seemed to complement the competitive strain of capitalism that was shaping America in the 1890s and 1900s. Wealth was concentrated in the hands of a very few, like Andrew Carnegie, whose book *The Gospel of Wealth* (1900) used Social Darwinist ideas to justify his position in society. The prevailing view was that by extending charity to the needy, one would not only prolong the survival of people who were not fit to live but jeopardize the survival of society as a whole. Nonetheless, Carnegie felt he had a responsibility to use his millions to benefit others, so rather than simply give his money away, he set up trusts for the establishment of universities, art galleries, and public libraries.

For many Americans, among them Protestants and social Progressives, the philosophies of Spencer and Sumner were ruthlessly barbaric and amoral. They accused Social Darwinists of degeneracy and nihilism. Instead of merely accepting that

those on the lowest rung of the ladder would simply be weeded out of society, they attempted to level the playing field for all Americans by enacting legislation and providing social services. They rejected the ideas of "rugged individualism" and "survival of the fittest" and promoted the idea of social cooperation.

Some, like the philosopher Lester Frank Ward, maintained that people possessed the capacity to change the world around them. Ward believed that a greater society would result from people's active protection of the weak rather than the laissez-faire doctrine of letting competition take its course.

Arts in the 1900s

Greatly influenced by Social Darwinism, the growth of poverty in urban areas, and labor unrest, writers and artists of the 1900s perceived the world as bleak. These younger writers and artists wanted to remove literature and art from the drawing rooms of genteel society and depict life in the street, in the factory, and the deteriorating farm in all its gritty detail. These writers believed that a kind of natural selection was taking place in society, but they did not share Spencer's and Sumner's optimism about the outcome. Instead, they focused on how the individual (the primary subject of literature) was affected by the unrestrained capitalist forces that drove this new society.

Naturalist writers, such as Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, and Jack London, created memorable characters who had to learn to survive in an uncaring and amoral society. The title character in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) is lured to Chicago by dreams of big-city sophistication and material prosperity, only to find herself trapped in a low-paying, stifling factory job. She escapes by becoming the mistress of a well-off man, whose demise corresponds to Carrie's rise as an actress. While she adapts to the new economy, he is destroyed by it.

In the visual arts, a new group of artists - called the ash can school - depicted the realities of everyday urban existence. They rejected the credo of earlier artists, who believed that beauty was the only true subject of art. Centered in New York City, this movement eschewed traditional views of technique and training in favor of painting from the gut in an impressionistic style. Their art featured an abundance of brown and gray landscapes crowded with buildings and bridges. But often the work of ash can artists celebrated the life of immigrants and the urban working class, finding aesthetic value in these groups neglected by earlier artists.

Critical Overview

When *The Call of the Wild* was published in 1903, it was a resounding critical and popular success. Reviewers applauded this exciting adventure tale and viewed it as a welcome alternative to the popular fiction of the day. J. Stewart Doubleday, reviewing the novel in *The Reader,* praised London's "suggestion of the eternal principles that underlie [life]," admitting that "it is cruel reading - often relentless reading; ... But we forgive the writer at last because his is true! He is not sentimental, tricky; he is at harmony with himself and nature."

The *Atlantic Monthly* found "something magnificent in the spectacle of [Buck's] gradual detachment from the tame, beaten-in virtues of uncounted forefathers, ... and his final triumph over the most dreaded powers of the wilderness." Overall, the reviewer praised it as "not a pretty story at all, but a very powerful one."

London's reputation also extended overseas, where he was considered one of America's foremost writers. Yet in America, despite the early attention the novel received, *The Call of the Wild* came to be seen as escapist fiction most suitable for children. London was barely mentioned in the literary histories published in the 1920s and after, and he was dismissed by the New Critics, the prominent literary scholars of the 1940s and 1950s.

London's fiction, especially *The Call of the Wild,* continued to be popular with the reading public. It wasn't until the 1960s that scholars reassessed their opinions regarding London's work. Since that time a flood of critical and biographical material on London has been published, elevating him once again as one of America's most important authors.

Critical commentary on The Call of the Wild focuses on autobiographical aspects of the story, the nature of the novel's allegory, and the question of whether it can be considered an example of literary naturalism. Joan Hedrick views the novel as London's attempt to deal with his past. "London had consciously closed the book on his working-class past. That self dwelt in a black and slippery pit to be recalled only in dreams. But in *The Call of the Wild* London was able, through his canine hero, to return to the scenes of his past, and, having got in touch with them, to imagine a different future."

Andrew Flink maintains that the novel is London's attempt, "either consciously or unconsciously," to deal with one specific part of his past, namely his stint in prison. He draws extensive parallels between London's experiences as a prisoner and Buck's life in the Klondike.

Most critics agree that the novel functions as an allegory, at least on one level. Abraham Rothberg expresses this view: "London was not only treating animals like human beings, but treating human beings like animals, recognizing no essential difference between man and animal. In *The Call of the Wild* he equated men with dogs and

wolves, and equated the harshness of the trail with the harshness of society, implying that force, savagery and cunning were equally the ways to success in both areas."

According to Charles N. Watson Jr., the novel is "about society as well as about the wilderness - or rather, ... it is about the conflict between the two." In other words, the novel is more than a simple allegory about society; it is a complex rendering of competing ideologies. Watson addresses the debate regarding the novel's naturalistic theme. To Watson, *The Call of the Wild* embodies both "Zolaesque naturalism ... - a reversion to savagery, a process of degeneration" and "romantic primitivism," by conveying "the forward movement of an initiation rite, through which Buck attains maturity and even apotheosis as a mythic hero." This dualism is perhaps the most discussed aspect of the novel.

While a few scholars, including Mary Kay Dodson, perceive the novel as a perfect embodiment of naturalism, others, such as Earl J. Wilcox, argue that the "naturalism that characterizes this novel is not consistently developed." Jonathan Auerbach sums up most opinions on the issue when he states, "There is a massive set of contradictions about Buck at the heart of the narrative, which moves in two seemingly opposite directions: toward nature from culture (the standard naturalist plot of decivilization), and a more troubled but also more passionate movement toward self-transcendence, which cannot be fully contained by the conventional naturalistic model."

Watson argues that it is precisely these contradictions that have made this novel appealing to readers and critics. In the novel he perceives "a fruitful tension between the naturalistic impulse, with its emphasis on society and environment, and the romantic impulse, which emphasizes the power of the exceptional individual to act on his own. Such a tension ... is one of the most fundamental themes of American fiction." As critics continue to explore the complexity of *The Call of the Wild,* it is becoming recognized as one of America's most enduring classics.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Bolan is an adjunct English instructor at the College of Lake County and Columbia College of Missouri extensions, a playwright, short story writer, poet, and essayist. In the following essay she speculates on why The Call of the Wild *is one of the most popular American novels in the world*.

Jack London's *Call of the Wild,* one of the most widely read American novels in the world, seems a strange choice for this distinction. The setting is the wilderness of the Klondike region, the protagonist is a dog, and the theme of the novel is devolution of the protagonist. Yet these are the same elements that garnered fame for the novel when it was first published in 1903; and these same elements continue to attract readers almost a century later.

In the late 1800s the Klondike region was swept by a gold rush. Gold had been found in California in 1848, and later in British Columbia, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. Yet this rush was in Alaska, purchased from Russia thirty years earlier in 1867, and Canada's Yukon Territory, and rivaled all previous gold rushes. It had formidable challenges, though; not only the forbidding cold, but also the uncharted geography made it a treacherous choice for the unprepared prospector. Still, many answered the call of quick money, including the young Jack London.

Although London staked a claim which he later abandoned, he was awed by the natural beauty he found in the ice-locked rivers and snow-encrusted mountains, in the spring thaw and sudden summer blooms, in the abundance of animal life from king salmon in the streams to caribou and bear on the plains to sheep and goats in the highlands. Before a year was up, London returned to his California home with debilitating scurvy. Yet he had found gold: his visions of the Klondike, the tales from the sourdoughs or old-timers, and his own intense experiences gave him enough material to write brilliant stories including his most masterful of all, *The Call of the Wild*.

Most early readers of the novel were content to curl up in a warm corner and read about the inhospitable climate and terrain of America's last frontier. Today, although Alaska attracts tourists, its environment and weather conditions will never attract as many permanent residents as, for example, the Sun Belt states do. The exotic land skirting the Arctic Circle is still forbidding—and if the environmentalists maintain their influence in the region, its pristine and primitive beauty will be preserved for future generations and future readers.

A beautiful, dangerous setting alone does not guarantee a great novel. Character is often paramount. In *The Call of the Wild,* however, the main character is assumed to be enslaved by man and by its own instinct. Both of these considerations would make Buck, the Saint Bernard-Scotch shepherd mix, a poor candidate for a riveting, dynamic character. Yet, by following his instincts, Buck takes his readers to the deepest reaches of the mind; and the readers, following their instincts, immediately translate Buck's

canine qualities into human ones. Buck, therefore, becomes a mythic hero, and here lies the real power of the novel.

In the first chapter, "Into the Primitive," Buck meets all the criteria necessary for becoming a mythic hero, according to Joseph Campbell's out- line in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. The hero must first answer "[t]he [c]all to [a]dventure" — although Buck is kidnapped instead of called. But since a domesticated dog would rather die than desert his master, only a violent act could wrench the loyal Buck away from the Judge and his happy life in a California valley.

The next step, the "[r]efusal of the [c]all," is fruitless. Buck's attempt to escape from the rope around his neck only tightens the rope and makes him more enraged. After this, "[s]upernatural [a]id" is offered in the form of the saloon keeper removing the rope and checking in on Buck throughout the night. Although "supernatural" is stretching a point, the saloon keeper frees Buck from a dangerous device and allows the dog to suffer alone, foreshadowing the self-reliance he'll need in the hostile environment to come.

"Crossing of the [f]irst [t]hreshold" comes when Buck meets the man in the red sweater, the dog breaker, who teaches Buck to obey by beating him with a club. Some dogs won't adapt, and they die fighting; others adapt with a broken spirit; Buck adapts a spirit that bends without breaking.

The last step is entering the "passage into the realm of night" and here, at the end of the chapter, is where Buck experiences snow for the first time. Despite the beauty of a veil of falling snow or the serenity it lends to a landscape, the snow symbolizes a formidable foe for the sled dogs and their mushers: the dogs need the ice accumulated from the day's run removed from their paws to prevent frostbite; the mushers need to be alert to the poor visibility and the disguised trails that could result in an accident in an environment where carelessness can quickly lead to death. Although Buck is mystified by the snow, it clearly belongs to the darker side of experience.

The following six chapters of the novel fall into place with the hero's "[r]oad of [t]rials." Here Buck learns important things from the other dogs: how to steal food without getting caught, how to sleep outside, how to interact with the other dogs. The friendly Newfoundland, Curly, greets a dog who attacks her in the wolf style—biting her face, then jumping back to avoid retaliation. When she stumbles to the ground because of her wounds, the other dogs tear her apart. Buck learns it's better to be wary, or even antisocial like Dave and Sol-leks. He also learns to deal with Spitz, the pack leader, whom he eventually defeats in a fight to the death, because he has one great advantage—imagination.

"Meeting with the [g]oddess," the next step, suggests the scene where Buck meets Mercedes, who is tenderhearted towards him at first, until her own survival takes precedence. She insists on riding the sled that is already overloaded. Her rationale for her husband and brother beating the dogs is circuitous: if they'd only run faster, they wouldn't get whipped. This is not a woman Buck likes, but she is the only one of the three Yukon greenhorns who could protect the dogs, and she fails.

The following step, "[w]oman as the [t]emptress," is missing because this is a novel without sex. While London never avoided writing about intimate relationships, he did avoid their sexual aspects, due in large part to his Victorian audience. Prostitution was rampant in the Klondike yet is never mentioned in the story. Since the focus is on the dog instead of man, this fact isn't missed; however, Buck is a sexual creature, and that part of his life is never directly addressed.

The next two steps involve Buck's relationship with John Thornton. "Atonement with the [f]ather" casts John Thornton in the fatherly role of the loving master, replacing Buck's former father-figure and master, the Judge. Through Thornton, Buck comes to believe in man again—not man in general, but man in particular. The "[a]potheosis," or elevation to divine status, occurs when Buck has avenged John Thornton's death by killing several Yeehat Indians and gains a reputation as the Ghost Dog. Finally, the "[u]ltimate [b]oon" may well be the markings on the young wolves, evidence of Buck's leadership, accompanying sexual dominance and contribution to the pack.

Campbell concludes that the hero's reintegration into society may be his most difficult task. In *The Call of the Wild,* there is no reintegration into the society of the domestic dog, a creature whose evolution is in the hands of its master. Buck has left that society, has devolved, undone the canine choice made in prehistory and referred to in the novel: the image of anxious prehistoric man sitting before the fire. Buck has visions of this, but he is moved to follow his deepest instincts: to break the pact with man and join the wolf pack—in fact, to strengthen the pack by broadening the gene pool.

This reversed ending, devolution over evolution, is the one that works best on the narrative level, for Buck has at last found his place. On the analogous level, it suggests the human struggle to answer heroically the wild call within, the call of individualism, a call all the world understands.

Source: Chloe Bolan, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Ashley asserts that London should be remembered as more than "a once-popular author, an author of juvenile literature, the master of the dog story," but concludes, "Nonetheless, London's place in literary history depends now and always will depend on the appeal of The Call of the Wild."

In the Soviet Union, Jack London is regarded as one of the greatest of American writers, chiefly because of such sentiments as are found in now obscure works of his such as "A Night with the Philomaths." There he has a firebrand orating about a revolution of the proletariat.

Twenty-five millions strong ... to make rulers and ruling classes pause and consider. The cry of this army is: No quarter! We want all that you possess. We want in our hands the reins of power and the destiny of mankind.... We are going to take your governments, your palaces, and all your purpled ease away from you, and in that day you shall work for your bread even as the peasant in the field or the starved and runty clerk in your metropolises.... You have failed in your management of society, and your management is to be taken away from you.... This is the revolution, my masters. Stop it if you can.

However, the early poverty and struggle that drew London to Marx and to communist or socialist ideology as he read books in the Klondike winter were followed by success and belief, according to Charles Child Walcutt, in himself as "an epitome of the Darwinian Struggle for Existence, his success an example of the [Herbert] Spencerian Survival of the Fittest." He had also read Nietzsche, and he came to people his prolific output of fiction with supermen, heroes who could succeed without or in spite of either communism or democracy, heroes that were not so much self-sacrificing socialists as rapacious capitalists of the spirit. They conquered by force of will and indomitable courage rather than by cleverness. In the great American tradition, they "hung in there"; and when the going got tough, they got tougher. London liked to think of himself as one of these semi-divine heroes. A newspaper reporter once noticed that his Korean houseboy called London "Mr. God." The reporter added, "Jack liked it."

In London's most popular novel, *The Call of the Wild,* the hero is a dog - the story is told entirely from the dog Buck's point of view - and even when ill treatment causes him to revert to the "dominant primordial beast" he is a symbol of what man can do to overcome obstacles and become the leader of his fellows. A mongrel, a cross between a German Shepherd and a St. Bernard, Buck is uprooted, stolen from his comfortable California home, and sold for work as a sled dog in the Gold Rush of 1897. Then he becomes the companion and eventually the savior of a young prospector. Finally he becomes the leader of a wild pack, and the book ends with these triumphant and famous words:

When the long winter nights come on and the wolves follow their meat into the lower valleys, he may be seen running at the head of the pack through the pale moonlight or

glimmering borealis, leaping gigantic above his fellows, his great throat a-bellow as he sings a song of the younger world, which is the song of the pack.

In some sense Buck is a representation of the author as he would like to see himself. An illegitimate child of a spiritualist (who later married John London, not his father), London quit school at 14, worked in a cannery, became a pirate on the ship *Razzle Dazzle* in San Francisco Bay at 16 and a sailor to Siberia and Japan at 17, tramped around, and went to the Klondike in 1897. There he found more adventure, opportunity for the will to power, risk and challenge and self-fulfillment, freedom from civilization's restraints - the life suited to a man who once said "morality is only an evidence of low blood pressure."

London returned from the Klondike without gold but with a rich vein of wilderness experiences which he industriously mined thereafter. *The Call of the Wild* is but one of his tales of heroism and violence in circumstances of danger. Where Bret Harte told the story of "A Yellow Dog" that became a snob in the gold fields and Eric Knight was to sentimentalize canine faithfulness in *Lassie Come-Home*, London told the tale of a dog who went from snob to superdog. London's was a rousing tale that had a message as well as a love for mankind.

London, who always had more drive than deftness in writing, was extremely clever to focus on Buck rather than on the human world around him. Judge Miller, by whose Santa Clara, California, fireside the young Buck lay in innocence and peace before he was "dognapped," has more of a function than a character in the book. John Thornton, the strong, silent, noble type to whom Buck becomes attached in the Yukon, is a stereotype: we provide his qualities from other reading rather than discover them in the novel. "Black" Burton and other bad guys are also stock characters. So are the greenhorns and the French-Canadians and the other humans. The animals, however, are sufficiently humanized, and if they, too, are stereotypes we are more impressed with the personalities they are given than with their lack of depth. Pike (the thief), Dub (the clumsy one), Dave and Sol-leks (the sled dogs who are dedicated "professionals"), Curly (the amiable Newfoundland dog) who "made advances to a husky dog the size of a full-grown wolf" and was "ripped open from eye to jaw" in an instant - these animals each have their place in the story and can be said to be characters in the fiction in a sense in which the humans are not. Among the dogs are the "bully" personalities so beloved of the Teddy Roosevelt period of American history. Among them is clearly shown "the law of club and fang": "So that was the way. No fair play. Once down, that was the end of you." Among them, also, there are treachery and nobility, faithfulness unto death, and a conviction that moral nature is "a vain thing and a handicap in the ruthless struggle for existence." They learn that "kill or be killed, eat or be eaten, was the law." Towering above all is Buck. "When he was made, the mould was broke," says Pete. And in awkward dialect Hans affirms: "Py jingo! I t'ink so mineself."

That a good deal of the book is given to describing the feelings of the animals is an advantage in the light of London's clumsiness with cliche ("Every animal was motionless as though turned to stone") and dialogue ("Plumb tuckered out, that's what's the matter"). The action moves swiftly; we are seldom aware of the "stoppages" of the sleds or that characters are "lessoned," of the awkward prolepsis or the literary infelicities, as

the melodramatic tale unfolds of how Buck "put his name many notches higher on the totem pole of Alaskan fame." We discover that sentiment can exist without a love story; Mercedes, the only woman in the book, is a shadow. Popular writers discover that a riveting story, as of the "kidnapped king" tried in the furnace and emerging pure gold (or "a yellow metal," as London would say), is enough.

Those who want more can see London as a racist, fascist, Social Darwinist; as a predecessor of Jack Kerouac and other "on the road" writers; as a tough-guy writer in the tradition developed by John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, and Norman Mailer, though perhaps best exemplified in Dashiell Hammett and other writers of crime fiction; as a writer about animals (such as Buck and the wolf-dog that seeks civilization in *White Fang*) foreshadowing George Orwell's *Animal Farm* in using them as metaphors of humanity; as a giant in his time - in 1913 the most popular and best-paid writer in the world - who was denigrated in later times; as (to note Andrew Sinclair's argument) a path-finder in areas as different as the boxing novel and sociobiology of the school of Lorenz, Ardrey, and Desmond Morris.

In the biography *Jack* (1977), Sinclair makes a gallant effort to rescue London from too close identification with the message that "a man with a club was a law-giver, a master to be obeyed" and the view of "nature red in tooth and claw." Sinclair does much to bring him to serious consideration as much more than a once-popular author, an author of juvenile literature, the master of the dog story. Nonetheless, London's place in literary history depends now and always will depend on the appeal of *The Call of the Wild*.

Source: Leonard R. N. Ashley, *"The Call of the Wild,"* in *Reference Guide to American Literature,* third edition, edited by Jim Kamp, St. James Press, 1994

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Mann suggests that various doubles, or pairings of antithetical characters and plot elements in the novel, contribute to the enduring popularity of The Call of the Wild *and to the value of the novel as an object of critical study.*

Dogs and men are fundamentally alike in the Klondike world of Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*: There was imperative need to be constantly alert; for these dogs and men were not town dogs and men. They were savages, all of them, who knew no law but the law of club and fang. Dogs and men answer the call of their savage natures and their terrifying environment in a violent, bloody, and continual struggle for survival. The primitive fears and desires which surface in Buck—the splendid animal on whom the story centers—also control his human masters. London describes the dog's development—his regression to instinct—in terms of *human* personality and action, so that by the end of the tale Buck emerges as a fully-realized character whose motivation can be thoroughly understood. *The Call of the Wild* remains, curiously, a dog story made humanly understandable: it is a story of the transformations that a dog undergoes in the development of a new identity.

London patterns the relationships between dogs and humans with special care, and they strike the reader with clarity and richness. In part this justifies one's discovery in the story of a controlling metaphor, a theme, usually applied to a peculiar facet of human character. The theme of the double in fact illuminates *The Call of the Wild* in several important ways, offering focus for revelations about Buck and his human masters alike. The double as theme, as idea, as complex symbology provides a radiant metaphorical center for the whole landscape of Buck's tale. It encompasses character— the presentations of Buck, men and other dogs, and their necessary relations—but it also touches the action, the points of view involved in the telling of the story, and its atmosphere and setting in significant ways. Doubles and doubling themselves become controlling, almost obsessive preoccupations in London's narrative. Accordingly, a consideration of the double can help to account for the fascination the book has had for readers in the seventy-odd years since its publication in July, 1903. It can also suggest ways in which the book, surely one of London's best, is worthy of continued serious critical attention....

If the theme of the double usually depicts men as deeply divided within themselves, at war with their own natures and with their surroundings, then its first manifestation [in *The Call of the Wild*] is in the opposing values, the polar attractions, of civilized and uncivilized worlds at work on the consciousness of a dog. The story develops through the impact of Buck's new Klondike environment upon his habits and expectations, conditioned as they are by his four-year sojourn in the civilized Santa Clara Valley of California. The logic of Buck's experience is to drive him increasingly, dramatically into the wild, so that even the interruption of this process by the civilizing love of John Thornton is not enough to return him to men and civilization.

London called the process the devolution or decivilization of a dog. Buck's first theft of food from the government courier Perrault early in the book marks the decay or going to pieces of his moral nature, a vain thing and a handicap in the ruthless struggle for existence. Stealing food helps Buck stay alive, and the narrator remarks that the completeness of his decivilization was now evidenced by his ability to flee from the defence of a moral consideration and so save his hide. The remainder of the story parallels the outer conflict between Buck and his new Klondike environment with the inner conflict between the savage character of his buried nature and the patterns of conduct imposed on that nature by civilized society. Like the chief character in O'Neill's *Emperor Jones,* Buck faces experiences that force instincts long dead [to become] alive again. The domesticated generations fell from him.

London dramatizes this split between civilization and savagery in several interesting ways, each involving a kind of double in turn. Though he once commented that God abhors a mongrel, he carefully states that Buck is of mixed breed—half St. Bernard and half Scotch shepherd. This racial split in Buck's physical nature shrewdly underscores the inner conflict between civilized values and their opposites.

More important in defining the antithetical parts of Buck's nature is London's constant use of images of war throughout the book. Civilization and savagery fight a war inside Buck; much of Chapter Three chronicles the secret growth of the dominant primordial beast within him. Marks of war are everywhere in the plot of *The Call of the Wild:* in the huskies' savage killing of the Newfoundland, Curly; in the fight of Buck's team with a pack of starving huskies; in the constant fighting among the dogs on the team; in the murder of John Thornton and his partner by marauding Yeehat Indians; in Buck's battle with the wolf pack at the end of the book. Buck fights a literal war with his rival Spitz, first as a rebellious underling deposing the leader of the dog team, and later in a significant affirmation of his savage inheritance:

In a flash Buck knew it. The time had come. It was to the death. As they circled about, snarling, ears laid back, keenly watchful for the advantage, the scene came to Buck with a sense of familiarity. He seemed to remember it all, the white woods, and earth, and moonlight, and the thrill of battle. Over the whiteness and silence brooded a ghostly calm.... To Buck it was nothing new or strange, this scene of old time. It was as though it had always been, the wonted way of things.

The war between Buck and Spitz provides London with one of his clearest metaphors for Darwinian struggle and survival. The taste of Spitz's blood remains with Buck, drawn back and waiting for the other dogs to finish off the wounded rival: Buck stood and looked on, the successful champion, the dominant primordial beast who had made his kill and found it good.

Francois, the team driver, notices the change in Buck the next day in a significant phrase: 'Eh? Wot I say? I spik true w'en I say day Buck two devils!' As if in confirmation of that statement, London further dramatizes the theme of the double in an explicit set of controlling oppositions. Each of these projects Buck's inner and outer conflicts in things of opposite value. The original opposition between civilization and the wild

encompasses all the others. The civilized world of the Southland, described continually in the book as warm, soft and easy, is opposed to the wild Northland, a terrifying arena of cold, hard brutality and sudden, violent death which yet—in London's most intriguing paradox—is finally seen as life-giving for the transformed Buck. The human world of ethical impulse and civilizing sanctions against violence is placed against the savage world of animals and savage men. More civilized dogs like Newfoundlands and even huskies find primitive counterparts in the wolves whose howl at the end of the story is the very sound of the wild.

Less obviously, London doubles the story into opposing worlds. Buck begins in the waking world of reality and ends in a silent, white wasteland which is also the world of dream, shadow, and racial memory. Buck survives to embrace life at the end of a book informed by death as the horrifying, rhythmic reflex of an entire order of things. Life in *The Call of the Wild* is a survival built on the death of other living creatures.

Between these opposing worlds and these opposing values Buck hovers continually in the action of the tale. Even the call of the wild itself, to which Buck responds with growing intensity throughout, receives double focus, twin definition: it is both lure and trap. In the second chapter, when Buck learns The Law of Club and Fang, he builds his first warm sleeping nest in the snow, to discover the next morning:

It had snowed during the night and he was completely buried. The snow walls pressed him on every side, and a great surge of fear swept through him—the fear of the wild thing for the trap. It was a token that he was harking back through his own life to the lives of his forbears; for he was a civilized dog, an unduly civilized dog, and of his own experience knew no trap and so could not of himself fear it. The muscles of his whole body contracted spasmodically and instinctively, the hair on his neck and shoulders stood on end, and with a ferocious snarl he bounded straight up into the blinding day, the snow flying about him in a flashing cloud.

The alluring world of snow and silence remains no less a tomb at the end of the book; though Buck is able to respond to it and still survive, John Thornton cannot.

It is impossible to view such doubled worlds and values, such connected oppositions, for very long without returning to London's pairing of dogs and humans with a renewed sense of its interest and complexity. Both Maxwell Geismar and Charles Child Walcutt have pointed to London's skill in keeping the story within an animal point of view while retaining for balance and proportion a wise degree of human perspective. In fact, *The Call of the Wild* does retain a double point of view throughout, and London's cunning alternation of dog and human perspectives becomes the essential mark of his craft in the story.

Source: John S. Mann, "The Theme of the Double in *The Call of the Wild,* " in *Markham Review,* Vol. 8, Fall, 1978, pp. 1-5.

Adaptations

Jack London Cassette Library, read by Jack Dahlby, includes readings of *The Call of the Wild, Martin Eden, and The Sea-Wolf*.

The Call of the Wild is read by Arnold Moss on a cassette made by Miller-Brody.

The Call of the Wild was first captured on film in 1935 by United Artists.

In 1972, a film was made of *The Call of the Wild* starring Charlton Heston as John Thornton. It is available on video.

The Call of the Wild was adapted for television in 1983. This version stars Rick Schroder as John Thornton and is available on video.

Topics for Further Study

Research the philosophies of the "superman" and the "survival of the fittest" as espoused by Friedrich Nietzsche and Herbert Spencer, two thinkers who influenced London. Compare them to London's philosophies found in *The Call of the Wild*.

Read Ralph Waldo Emerson's seminal essay "Self-Reliance" (1841). Write an essay considering whether or not you think it was possible for Buck to be a "self-reliant" individual at the end of the nineteenth century.

For decades *The Call of the Wild* has been considered by many to be a children's book. Do you think it is an appropriate book for children, and why? Who do you think the intended or most appropriate audience for this book is—children, teens, adult readers, or literary scholars?

Research changing views of nature and the American wilderness in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, studying such figures as Henry David Thoreau, Theodore Roosevelt, and John Muir. Write an essay in which you discuss London's place within these debates/traditions.

Compare and Contrast

1900s: Americans recognize the need for conserving or protecting the environment. The U.S. government begins forest preservation efforts in 1891. In 1892 John Muir founded the Sierra Club. In 1903 President Theodore Roosevelt created the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Today: The Sierra Club still exists and is a major force in the environmentalist movement. Business and environmentalists clash frequently over America's natural resources and endangered species.

1900s: Indigenous to the area, wolves inhabit most of the northwestern United States, Canada, and Alaska.

Today: Wolves have long ago disappeared from most of the United States. A project to reintroduce wolves to Yellowstone National Park is hotly contested by local ranchers, but is implemented with some success in the 1990s.

1900s: Alaska, which became part of the United States in 1867, was sparsely populated until the gold rushes in Juneau (1880) and the Klondike (1897). The excitement regarding these discoveries brought streams of fortune hunters to settle the interior.

Today: Alaska became a state in 1959. For many years, oil was the major economic product of the state. But in the 1980s, with the depression of the oil market, Alaska's economy suffered. When the *Exxon Valdez* ran aground in 1989, the oil polluted more than 1,285 miles of shoreline, including the Prince William Sound wildlife sanctuary. Alaska possesses the largest area of unspoiled wilderness in the United States and continues to try to balance its economic and environmental interests.

1900s: In 1901 Theodore Roosevelt became President of the United States. A member of the "Rough Riders," a volunteer cavalry regiment, Roosevelt was a war hero in the Spanish- American War in 1898. He was also an avid sportsman, hunter, and adventurer, and he embodied the robust manliness that set a new standard for American manhood.

Today: President William Jefferson Clinton was impeached by the House of Representatives in 1998 for lying under oath about an affair he had with a White House intern. Many Americans believe Clinton's affairs and lying to cover them up are a disgrace to America's values and a sign of the deterioration of the presidency.

What Do I Read Next?

Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat (1997), written by Mike Hawkins, explores the way individual thinkers and larger social groups define and interpret the theories of Social Darwinism. It also examines the traditional and revisionist approaches historians have taken with Social Darwinism.

Modern Man in Search of a Soul (1933) summarizes many of Carl Jung's psychoanalytical theories. London discovered Jung's work late in life and found in it an expression of many ideas that corresponded with his own. Most notably, Jung's theory of the "collective unconscious" was anticipated in *The Call of the Wild*.

Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1895) is a collection of tales featuring Mowgli, a young boy raised by wolves. The stories take place in the jungles of India and include a cast of talking animals who teach Mowgli valuable lessons. These stories were among the most popular animal stories for children when London wrote *The Call of the Wild*.

Martin Eden (1909) was London's most autobiographical novel. It chronicles the story of a young man who rises from poverty to fame as an internationally-acclaimed author.

In *The Road* (1907), London describes his early tramping experiences and traces his development from hobo and "blond-beastly" adventurer to an author and a socialist.

In *White Fang* (1906), considered a companion piece to *The Call of the Wild,* London depicts a wild dog who becomes domesticated, reversing Buck's transformation.

Frank Norris's *McTeague* (1899) is a classic example of naturalism, as heredity and environment determine the fate of luckless individuals in turn-of-the-century San Francisco.

Topics for Discussion

1. Compare Buck's life on the ranch with his life in the wild. Which is better for Buck? Why?

2. What qualities does Buck have that make him superior to the other dogs? What qualities make him an effective leader?

3. What is "the law of club and fang," and how does it operate?

4. Why are Hal, Charles, and Mercedes unable to survive on the trail? Explain several different causes for their failure.

5. Buck begins to dream of a ragged, hairy man crouching before a fire. Where do these dreams come from? What do they mean?

6. Trace the stages in Buck's retrogression, noting the chief factors responsible for his change.

7. Jack London uses such words as "primordial," "inexorable," "carnivorous," and "wraith" to describe Buck. What do these words mean, and how effectively do they characterize Buck?

8. How does Buck's attitude toward human beings progressively change as a result of his experiences?

9. Explain how Buck eventually becomes part of Yeehat legend.

10. What can you learn about the skill of dog-sledding from reading The Call of the Wild? What skills are necessary for survival on the trail?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. London's book White Fang tells the story of a wild dog who becomes tamed. Compare White Fang to The Call of the Wild. Which book do you prefer? Why?

2. Write a report on the Klondike gold rush of 1897. Explain how this gold rush differed from the California gold rush of 1849.

3. Robert Service was a very popular poet who wrote ballads about the Yukon at the same time Jack London was writing essays and fiction. Read some of Service's poems, and compare the attitudes of the two writers toward the arctic wilderness.

4. For centuries, Eskimos in Alaska and the Yukon have learned to adapt to their environment. How has their environment and their way of life been threatened by modern civilization? Consult magazines and newspapers for current articles.

5. William Golding's novel The Lord of the Flies (1954) is another story about retrogression in a wild environment. Read Golding's novel. Do you find it more pessimistic than The Call of the Wild, or more optimistic? Why?

Literary Precedents

The philosophy behind The Call of the Wild was shaped by London's reading of Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, Immanuel Kant, Benjamin Kidd, Friedrich Nietzsche, and others.

Buck, the novella's canine protagonist, is both a product of natural selection and an example of Nietzsche's heroic morality.

But the archetypal nature of The Call of the Wild links it with the tradition of great American symbolists: Poe, Hawthorne, Melville. London's connection with Melville is most interesting, for both authors explore the limits of knowledge and utilize powerful animal symbols in hostile environments.

Buck's response to the mystical call of the wild and his transformation into a mythical figure are reminiscent of Melville's symbolic use of the white whale in Moby Dick (1851).

Further Study

Raymond Benoit, "Jack London's *The Call of the Wild,*" in *American Quarterly,* Vol. 20, No. 2, Summer, 1968, pp. 246- 48.

Benoit contends that The Call of the Wild is part of the tradition of "pastoral protest" literature in America and that it embodies the "American dream of escaping from the entangling complexity of modern living."

Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin, *The Call of the Wild: A Naturalistic Romance,* Twayne, 1994.

Offers a detailed analysis of the novel's competing ideologies.

—, editor, *Critical Essays on Jack London,* G.K. Hall, 1983.

This collection contains important early assessments of London's works as well as contemporary critical essays.

Charles Child Walcutt, "Jack London: Blond Beasts and Superman," in *American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream,* University of Minnesota Press, 1956, p. 87-113.

In the chapter on London in his classic study of American naturalism, Walcutt discusses the nature of morality in *The Call of the Wild*.

Earl J. Wilcox, editor, *The Call of the Wild by Jack London: A Casebook with Text, Background Sources, Reviews, Critical Essays, and Bibliography,* Nelson Hall, 1980.

In addition to the text of the novel, this book contains reviews, helpful essays on the novel, the story "Batard," and nine letters by London pertaining to the novel.

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J. Stewart Doubleday, in a review of *The Call of the Wild,* in *The Reader,* Vol. 2, No. 4, September, 1903, pp. 408-09.

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Abraham Rothberg, in the introduction to *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang,* by Jack London, Bantam Books, 1963, pp. 1-17.

Charles Watson Jr., "Ghost Dog: 'The Call of the Wild,'" in *The Novels of Jack London: A Reappraisal,* The University of Wisconsin Press, 1983, pp. 33-52.

Earl J. Wilcox, "Jack London's Naturalism: The Example of *The Call of the Wild,"* in *Jack London Newsletter,* Vol. 2, No. 3, September-December, 1969, pp. 91-101.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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