



**HUMANIZING ANIMAL AS A REFLECTION OF NATURALISM IN
ACK LONDON'S NOVEL *THE CALL OF THE WILD***

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Abstract

*The purposes of this article are to analyze some concepts of naturalism which are used to describe the portrayal of Buck (dog) in Jack London's novel *The Call of the Wild* and to understand how London uses the attribution of human qualities in humanizing the animal protagonist Buck. The method of this study is descriptive qualitative with naturalistic approach. The data are in the form of words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. As the results, there are two important findings. First, some naturalism concepts such as the concept of survival of the fittest, determinism, and violence are shown in details. The forces of heredity and environment toward Buck's life journey are clearly discussed well. Second, the dog-protagonist, Buck, is attributed with characteristics such as love, ambition, and revenge, traits that usually describe humans. London as the author makes a strong case that the ingredients of human morality such as sympathy, love sharing, rules, and hatred are very much evident in other animal. It is emphasized again and again, *The Call of the Wild* exposes the essence of human's life. From depiction of Buck, London has successfully placed the readers in the animal's point of view. For conclusion, whether human morality could never have developed without foundation of fellow feeling that every species shares with other animals, and consider it as a reflection of the way of human thinking toward natural environment and the existence of other creatures.*

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INTRODUCTION

Naturalism in literature is a kind of literary movements that began in late nineteenth century. It applies both to scientific ideas and principles, such as instinct and theory of evolution, and also fiction. According to Williams (1976: 217), naturalistic writers were influenced by Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. They believed that one's heredity and social environment largely determine one's character. Naturalism attempts to determine scientifically the environment or heredity, influencing the actions of its subjects. In this matter, subjects being talked refer to the characters in which the authors focus -- human and animal.

Usually, many novel writers use human as the main character in their story. But in some cases, there are some naturalistic authors such as Ernest Thompson Seton, Anna Sewell, and Jack London who use animal as character that can stand as commonly recognized type of human behavior. For example, they use dog or horse as their protagonist (sometimes in the first person) to represent the emotional capabilities of an animal. Of course, this device encourages readers to think about the subject in a new way. People will think about the environment and animals differently, with the idea that these beings have inherent value similar to humans.

Naturalism may be better understood by study of the basic rules of that literary movement. It is believed that the authors give a new idea to convince the readers of something new and more modern in their fiction by writing such animal stories, with capabilities of reasoning, emotion, experiencing, and feeling. Their innovation in fiction-writing is the creation of characters and plots based on the scientific method.

Based on the explanation above, the writer can gather useful information to support his research about *Humanizing*

Animal as a Reflection of Naturalism in Jack London's Novel The Call of the Wild. The discussion of naturalism is essential for the understanding of why the novel is written in the way it is. The novel deals with an animal protagonist as though it is a person with thoughts and emotions. From an animal's point of view, the novel creates an interesting perspective, especially for the readers who believe that the issue can be appropriate as an object of a discussion about humanizing animal as a reflection of naturalism. In addition, the discussion of the chosen topic gives a reflection of the way of human thinking toward natural environment and the existence of other creatures.

Theory and Approach

In literature, naturalism is a kind of literary movement that began in the late nineteenth century. It suggests the involvement of environment, heredity, and social conditions in shaping the characters. According to Campbell (2010) in her article entitled *Naturalism in American Literature, Literary Movement*, the term naturalism describes a type of literature that attempts to apply scientific principles of objectivity and detachment to its study of human beings. Naturalism implies a philosophical position: for naturalistic writers, since human beings are, in Emile Zola's phrase *human beasts*, characters can be studied through their relationships to their surroundings. Through this objective study of human beings, naturalistic writers believed that the laws behind the forces that govern human lives might be studied and understood. In addition, a simple definition of naturalism by High (1986: 87) is defined as the idea that art and literature should present the world and people just as science shows they really are.

Some criteria of literary naturalism are brought up by Charles C. Walcutt. In *American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream* (1956: 20-21), he states that the major themes and motifs of naturalism are determinism,

survival, violence, and taboo. The theme of determinism, which is of course basic, carries the idea that natural law and socioeconomic influences are more powerful than human will. The theme of survival grows out of the application of determinism to biological competition; the notion that survival is supreme motive in animal life provides a point of view from which all emotion, motivation, and conflict may be approached; it fastens man to his physical roots. The theme of violence grows with the transfer of emphasis from tradition (ultimately supernatural tradition) to survival. Animal survival is a matter of violence, of force against force; and with this theme there emerge various motifs having to do with the expression of force and violence and with the exploration of man's capacities for such violence. The last link in this chain, dangling from survival and violence, comes an assault on taboo: a host of topics that had been considered improper -- sex, disease, bodily functions, obscenity, depravity -- were found to be in the province of physical survival.

The main criterion for naturalism is the idea of determinism, that humans and animals are capable of acting only within pre-determined environments (Binford 2004: 72). Naturalism assumes that human and the other creature such as animal have little or even no control over what happens to them. They are unable to exercise free will to influence their situations. Individuals are the mercy of internal and external forces which control their destinies. Naturalistic works tend to see humans and animals as the products of determinism and environment. Naturalistic writers claim to present their subjects objectively with no comment on the morality or the fairness of what happens to the characters.

Naturalism Concepts Used to Describe the Portrayal of Buck

The Call of the Wild shows the features of literary naturalism: the story is presented

realistically and directly, and dramatizes the force of environment in shaping the character. The control of the plot and focused point of view in portraying the dog-protagonist Buck, give the story its remarkable coherence. In telling the story, London's style of naturalistic movement is very strong. He explores the hidden character traits, triggered by interaction with Buck's environment, that determine his fate. Surely, his exploration with Buck as the main character in the novel cannot be separated from theory of evolution of Charles Darwin that concerns the evolution of mankind in the question: Was man born as he was today or did he evolve from a more primitive species? This theory is furthered emphasized by London's use of naturalistic style in portraying Buck and the relationship to his surroundings.

In the story, the concept of survival of the fittest is the dominant theme showed explicitly to the readers. As a simple term, a magnificent dog named Buck who lives on Judge Miller's ranch in sun-kissed Santa Clara Valley is kidnapped and taken to Alaska where through numerous hardships, encounters with the wilderness, and turns back to his primordial state. His superior prowess enables him to adapt readily to the northern climate and the harsh demands of the environment. But he possesses one additional quality-imagination. Buck fights with his head as well as his muscle.

In Chapter 1 - *Into the Primitive*, the concepts of naturalism are summarized in the first four opening lines.

*Old longings nomadic leap,
Chafing at custom's chain;
Again from its brumal sleep
Wakens the ferine strain.
(1903: 15)*

In fact, within each of individuals there is a primitive beast that can arise at any particular time, usually under extreme stress. These forces are hibernating, and at the right time will awaken and assume their bestial

qualities. These are prime examples of primordialism. Buck has been basically “*jerked from the heart of civilization and flung into the heart of things primordial.*” (1903: 39) This phrase simply summarizes how Buck will spend his life entirely, from the comfortable life into the harsh wilderness. It is the beginning of the transformation that carries him into nature heart of wilderness.

In Chapter 2 - *The Law of Club and Fang*, Buck learns the law of fang and that there is “*No fair play. Once down, that was the end of you.*” (1903: 41) In keeping with the survival of the fittest concept, Buck learns to eat anything to help him survive and his senses become especially keen. Buck’s evolutionary process is a combination of natural selection and of other Darwinian accidents through which he has evolved. The probability of his existence has been characterized.

Some of the things Buck learns when he goes north are by observation and experience, such as when he realizes he has to obey to the man with the red sweater because he is no match for a man with a club. He learns some survival strategies by observation, such as when he observes the other dogs dig a hole in the snow for warmth.

Another lesson. So that was the way they did it, eh? Buck confidently selected a spot, and with much fuss and waste effort proceeded to dig a hole for himself. In a trice the heat from his body filled the confined space and he was asleep. The day had been long and arduous, and he slept soundly and comfortably, though he growled and barked and wrestled with bad dreams.
(1903: 47)

At his first night, Buck can adapt fast in freezing weather although he shivers with cold badly. Of course, it proves his quality of learning to the surroundings. But, the primitive quality of Buck is from his primordial vision. He could not learn all that he does if he did not have the quality of his wild ancestor hidden within him. This

quality is gradually called awake by circumstances and environment. This is such a key point that London emphasizes it again. Buck is able to open his collective memory and instincts of his ancestor. He does not have to learn everything for himself. He just activates the knowledge that is deep inside him, and flows with nature.

In two early episodes of the novel, Buck must learn “*the law of club and fang*” in order to survive in the harsh arctic environment. Buck’s law of club is first taught by the man with the red sweater, who shows him that the strongest individuals are the ones who rule. Buck also learns the primitive law of fang from the other team dogs, such as Dave, Sol-leks, and the rude team leader, Spitz. From them, Buck learns that he must either master or be mastered, bite or be bitten.

About Buck in the end of chapter 2, he is depicted implicitly by the concept of determinism.

Thus, as token of what a puppet thing life is the ancient song surged through him and he came into his own again; and he came 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.

(1903: 56-57)

From the quotation above, the readers know whether good or not, Buck’s fate has been predetermined by environmental factors: because the gold-miners need impressive dogs to pull the sleds and because Manuel the gardener needs money. Here, Buck has little or even no control over what happens to him. It is surely underlining Buck as a product of his environment, his heredity, and his deterministic universe.

The Chapter 3 of the novel shows if Buck has become “*The Dominant Primordial Beast*” and the story continues as the conflict for leadership between Buck and Spitz.

It was inevitable that the clash for leadership should come. Buck wanted it. He

wanted it because it was his nature, because he had been gripped tight by that nameless, incomprehensible pride of the trail and trace -- that pride which holds dogs in the toil to the last gasp which lures them to die joyfully in the harness, and breaks their hearts if they are cut out of the harness.

(1903: 74)

Buck is big and intelligent but the experience lies with Spitz although Buck has imagination and his prowess increases. His primordial quality of the nature is called awake within him, transforming Buck into the wild beast who belongs to the nature. Then, this primordial vision of him comes out more and more in his mind when Buck must face his rival, Spitz, in a battle to the death. In the moments before the battle begins.

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. There was not the faintest whisper of air -- nothing moved, not a leaf quivered, the visible breaths of the dogs rising slowly and lingering in the frosty air. They had made short work of the snowshoe rabbit, these dogs that were ill-tamed wolves; and they were now drawn up in an expectant circle. They, too, were silent, their eyes only gleaming and their breaths drifting slowly upward. To Buck it was nothing new or strange, this scene of old time.

(1903: 85)

In that deadly battle with Spitz, Buck finds himself on familiar condition same as before. He does not have to learn how to fight. Buck remembers his memory of his wild ancestor and successfully uses his instinct to kill his rival. It is definitely noted that the concept of violence is emphasized clearly through the battle scene. In order to survive, Buck must face the circumstance: fight his rival, Spitz.

In Chapter 4 - *Who Has Won to Mastership*, the story reminds the readers of survival of the fittest when Buck and his mates are making the journey back to Dawson even though it snows every day, in spite of the fact that the dogs are in poor condition because of lack of rest and healing. Buck has now won mastership and with this one must admire the dog's noble courage.

Each night the dogs were attended to first. They ate before the drivers ate, and no man sought his sleeping-robe till he had seen to the feet of the dogs he drove. Still, their strength went down. Since the beginning of the winter they had travelled eighteen hundred miles, dragging sleds the whole weary distance; and eighteen hundred miles will tell upon life of the toughest. Buck stood it, keeping his mates up to their work and maintaining discipline, though he, too, was very tired. Billee cried and whimpered regularly in his sleep each night. Joe was sourer than ever, and Sol-leks was unapproachable, blind side or other side.

(1903: 105)

Every dog in Buck's team has each problem toward the environment. However, Buck as the present leader shows his capability to keep his mates maintaining discipline. He successfully surpasses the handicap in order to keep surviving in the wild.

In Chapter 5 - *The Toil of Trace and Trail*, there Buck is sold to a group of inexperienced people who try also to pack too much on a sled for the tired dogs to pull. These people is shown from the South who are faced by wholly different circumstances of the great North, and portrayed the inability to follow to such extremely changing conditions. Each of them tries to take too much civilization with them into this diverse uncivilized land.

Kind-hearted citizens caught the dogs and gathered up the scattered belongings. Also, they gave advice. Half the load and twice the dogs, if they ever expected to reach Dawson, was what was said. Hal and his sister and brother-in-law listened

unwillingly, pitched tent, and overhauled the outfit. Canned goods were turned out that made men laugh, for canned goods on the Long Trail is a thing to dream about. "Blankets for a hotel" quoth one of the men who laughed and helped. "Half as many is too much; get rid of them. Throw away that tent, and all those dishes, -- who's going to wash them, anyway? Good Lord, do you think you're travelling on a Pullman?"

(1903: 122-123)

The theme of survival of the fittest, or can be called adaptability, applies to humans as well as to animals. In contrast to Buck, who adapts readily how to survive in the harsh arctic environment, the incompetent miners Hal, Charles, and Mercedes are unable to adapt to their surroundings. They lack discipline, skill, imagination, and self-control. They attempt to use fourteen dogs instead of nine, not considering that their sled cannot carry food for so many dogs. They also carry unnecessary luggage, which only serve to trouble them. In this dull little episode, London as the author conveys that not all people have knowledge of even the basic of survival, for Hal, Charles, and Mercedes first quarrel, then fight, and finally beat the dogs into moving the heavy sleds. London presents them objectively with no comment on the morality or the fairness of what happens to them.

Then, John Thornton, an informed and interested wanderer, warns these so-called civilized intellectual people to stop beating the dogs and to go no further on the frozen river. After seeing their particularly harsh treatment of Buck, Thornton rescues Buck from the group, and then these naive people fall through the ice and drown.

In Chapter 6 - *For the Love of a Man*, the most often remembered but far less characteristic of the book's themes, London sentimentalizes his story to make effective the contrast of the last chapter where Buck answers the call of the wild. Another theme that is popular in animal stories is introduced, the love and loyalty between

human and animal. John Thornton revives memories of the days before Buck came north. Still, the episode only quickens Buck's dilemma. Buck cannot decide between the call of Thornton's love and the call of the wild.

The first sentence in Chapter 7 - *The Sounding of the Call* says that "Buck earned sixteen hundred dollars in five minutes for John Thornton," (1903: 177) in summarizing the events that characterize Buck as the love of man. But the love and the fame of his achievement in civilization cannot forever restrain Buck. Trying to break completely with civilization, Buck discovers that it is not easy to leave the man he loves, but returning to find his master dead, Buck knows that "The last tie was broken. Man and the claims of man no longer bound him." (1903: 206) Buck discovers, Thornton is death at the hands of a tribe of Yeehats. In his revenge, Buck achieves his highest aim, his action pointing to the implicit allegory of the novel,

Death, as a cessation of movement, as a passing out and away from the lives of the living, he knew, and he knew John Thornton was dead. It left a great void in him, somewhat akin to hunger, but a void which ached and ached, and which food could not fill. At times, when he paused to contemplate the carcasses of the Yeehats, he forgot the pain of it; and at such times he was aware of a great pride in himself, -- a pride greater than any he had yet experienced. He had killed man, the noblest game of all, and he had killed in the face of the law of club and fang. He sniffed the bodies curiously. They had died so easily. It was harder to kill a husky dog than them.

(1903: 204-205)

Symbolically, the law of survival has become explicit. The law of club and fang merge together and show the influences in killing of the Indian-man by the dog-man. Once again, animal survival is a matter of violence, of force against force.

Once in the wild permanently, Buck soon successfully defends his life against a group of wolves. Buck's evolution, which

culminates in his change into the leader of a group of wolves, is probably the most provocative theme of the book. It reflects London's belief of naturalism that environment determines character. Away from the ease of civilized life, Buck must rely increasingly upon his survival instincts. Under the cruel conditions of the environment, he develops certain primitive traits. His nature has determined his life. He becomes more cunning, violent, deliberate, and calculating. He learns how to kill mercilessly and to show no sign of weakness.

As Buck adapts to live in the wild, he begins to experience primordial visions more and more, to imagine life in some earlier, more primitive age. He dreams of wild beasts and a hairy man crouching beside a fire. He hears the howl of the wolves and instinctively responds. He becomes increasingly restless and begins to wander into the forest. After the death of John Thornton, Buck answers the call of the wild and takes up the life of his ancestors.

How London Uses the Attribution of Human Qualities in Humanizing the Animal Protagonist Buck

Aside from the concepts of naturalism in portraying Buck and his surroundings, another interesting point to be discussed from the novel is the use of animal as the main character which can stand as commonly recognized type of human behavior. In the story, Buck as the main character is personalized to a human emotionally. London tends to tell the story through dog's eyes, as the center of the attention. It is interesting that London's narrative revolves so closely around Buck and his thoughts, since Buck is a dog and not a person. Because the third person narrator goes inside Buck's head, the readers get an intricate look at the protagonist's reasoning, feelings, dreams, and desires. For example, when Buck is taken by the house gardener

named Manuel without untrusting feeling and sold to a stranger.

Buck had accepted the rope with quiet dignity. To be sure, it was an unwonted performance: but he had learned to trust in men he knew, and to give them credit for a wisdom that outreached his own. But when the ends of the rope were placed in the stranger's hands, he growled menacingly. He had merely intimated his displeasure, in his pride believing that to intimate was to command.

(1903: 20)

That scene surely represents the emotional capabilities of an animal in its feeling and simple reasoning. Another example is when Buck discovers his love, John Thornton, is death at the hands of a tribe of Yeehats. Of course, London depicts the raging atmosphere surrounding Buck in richness of detail.

From the camp came the faint sound of many voices, rising and falling in a sing-song chant. Bellying forward to the edge of the clearing, he found Hans, lying on his face, feathered with arrows like a porcupine. At the same instant Buck peered out where the spruce-bough lodge had been and saw what made his hair leap straight up on his neck and shoulders. A gust of overpowering rage swept over him. He did not know that he growled, but he growled aloud with a terrible ferocity. For the last time in his life he allowed passion to usurp cunning and reason, and it was because of his great love for John Thornton that he lost his head.

(1903: 202)

It should be noted that Buck, the extraordinarily powerful great dog, is used here as an anthropomorphic (meaning attributing human qualities to an animal) example of similar qualities for all humankind. In order to make Buck a symbol for humankind, London as the author gives him characteristics such as loyalty, love, ambition, and revenge, traits that usually describe humans. He makes a strong case that the ingredients of human morality such as sympathy, love sharing, rules, and hatred

are very much evident in other animal: it is within Buck. It can be seen in a scene when one of the dogs named Curly becomes the victim of the attack of wolves. Instead of helping Curly like Buck does, Spitz the dog-leader just watches and laughs. Buck sees “*Spitz ran out his tongue and laughed again, and from that moment Buck hated him with a bitter and deathless hatred.*” (1903: 41)

Talking about the sympathy and sharing, not only Buck who is depicted with feeling of sympathy, but also the implicit aim of the novel in telling the story to the readers. The tone of the story is very reflective. London often steps away from plot to comment on the way Buck is learning, how Buck’s character changes, or what the call of the wild surroundings begins to mean to Buck. These reflective passages are most striking at certain key events in the story, such as when Buck chases the rabbit in third chapter of the novel.

This ecstasy, this forgetfulness of living, comes to the artist, caught up and out of himself in a sheet of flame; it comes to the soldier, war-mad on a stricken field and refusing quarter; and it came to Buck, leading the pack, sounding the old wolf-cry, straining after the food that was alive and that fled swiftly before him through the moonlight. He was sounding the deeps of his nature, and of the parts of his nature that were deeper than he, going back into the womb of Time. He was mastered by the sheer surging of life, the tidal wave of being, the perfect joy of each separate muscle, joint, and sinew in that it was everything that was not death, that it was aglow and rampant, expressing itself in movement, flying exultantly under the stars and over the face of dead matter that did not move.

(1903: 83)

The scene shows that there is a great feeling within Buck when he leads his group of dogs, strains after a rabbit. Based on London’s comments in the whole passages, it is obviously that the author is clearly sympathetic to Buck’s character, rendering

him in a genuine and compassionate manner in his predetermined fate. It is such a key point that London aims in telling this story from animal’s point of view. From Buck, the readers can possibly feel sympathy toward the characterization of Buck, and consider whether human morality could never have developed without foundation of fellow feeling that every species shares with other animals. In this case, London takes his humanizing project a step further, showing some simple descriptions of human moral concepts as figures of speech to depict and lend meaning to the behavior of non-human animals. As in *Revolution and Other Essays: The Other Animals* (1908), an article wrote by London himself, he directly answers to those who question the dog-hero Buck in *The Call of the Wild*.

And I did this repeatedly, to the clogging of my narrative and in violation of my artistic canons; and I did it in order to hammer into the average human understanding that these dog-heroes of mine were not directed by abstract reasoning, but by instinct, sensation, and emotion, and by simple reasoning. Also, I endeavored to make my stories in line with the facts of evolution; I hewed them to the mark set by scientific research, and awoke, one day, to find myself bundled neck and crop into the camp of the nature-fakers.

Furthermore, the story of *The Call of the Wild* relies on the knowledge of Darwinian thought to defend the statement about Buck. If it is not describing conclusion about man in a dog-hero named Buck, London’s entire literary career, particularly in relationship to the naturalistic movement, can be called into question. From *The Call of the Wild*, surely the readers can decide for themselves the reason why the novel is made based on the Darwinian allegory that is directly applicable to human existence. It seems that the articulation between the explicit relationships of the evolutionary and primordial concepts developed by Darwin is the most interesting part from the novel. London seems little concerned about

describing either Buck or the influences of environment toward the character with a nice distinction. Nevertheless, clear exploration which focuses on naturalistic implications of Buck and the environment accounts for the meaning of the work.

The meaning of *The Call of the Wild* besides its naturalism and Darwinian theories is subject to a variety of interpretations. London as naturalistic writer believes that the laws behind the forces that govern human and animal lives can be studied and understood. On the simplest opinion, Buck in *The Call of the Wild* can be called as an example of natural selection product. However, this popular novel illustrates the author's appeal to the untamed passions and recounts of the escape into the wild. Because the focus of naturalism is human and animal nature, story in London's writing is Buck-driven rather than plot-driven. With all of this, Buck has been portrayed in *The Call of the Wild* as a vivid picture of the dilemma of the character toward the influences of surroundings. Since the novel is also a human allegory, this suggests that for humans also, civilization is a culture that hides the hidden primitive qualities that may appear when circumstances demand it.

In some cases, humans can be cruel and unkind to each other, and making so many guilty crimes to animals in the wild and those under their control as a pet. Those animals are more vulnerable and have no voice. Here, the novel has given them a voice in this story. The readers are successfully placed in such a point of view: in the head of the dog-protagonist Buck.

CONCLUSION

In *The Call of the Wild*, Jack London as the author uses naturalism to describe the portrayal of Buck. In telling the story, he explores the hidden character traits, triggered by interaction with Buck's environment, that

determine his fate. Some naturalism concepts such as the concept of survival of the fittest, determinism, and violence are shown in details. The forces of heredity and environment toward Buck's life journey are absolutely the interesting points from the novel. Also, the depiction of Buck which is composed of strong and often warring emotions: passions, such as love, ambition, or the desire for dominance are clearly discussed well.

Aside from naturalism, another interesting part from the novel is the use of animal as the main character which is personalized to a human emotionally. The dog-protagonist, Buck, is attributed with characteristics such as love, ambition, and revenge, traits that usually describe humans. London as the author makes a strong case that the ingredients of human morality such as sympathy, love sharing, rules, and hatred are very much evident in other animal. It is emphasized again and again, *The Call of the Wild* exposes the essence of human's life. From depiction of Buck, London has successfully placed the readers in the animal's point of view. The readers can possibly feel sympathy toward the characterization of Buck, and consider it as a reflection of the way of human thinking toward natural environment and the existence of other creatures. They should learn something from Buck, who progresses toward independence after learning to survive in a hard world.

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