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From the Klondike to the Canine: Unearthing Jack London's Worldview in *White Fang*

Jack London's extensive literary works, informed by the challenges and adventures faced early in life, gave London foundational context, characterizing the perspectives in his published writings. His varied experiences as a sailor, prospector, journalist, activist, and famed novelist further mirror the author's profound and complex philosophy. His seminal novel *White Fang* (1906) reflects London's worldview, delivering a narrative that displays four central themes: 1) the dichotomy between civilization and the wild, 2) instinctual survival versus learned skill, 3) free will and predestination, and 4) the duality of existing in both civilized and natural worlds. Accordingly, *White Fang's* themes echo London's life and ideology – marrying a nuanced worldview of living within the laws of humanity and nature.

Born “illegitimate” into poverty on January 12, 1876 - in San Francisco, California, John Griffith Chaney, better known as John London, experienced an upbringing marred with struggle and adversity (Reese 14). Through early childhood and adolescence, he juggled life between nature's harsh, unrestrained brutality and the equally savage sociopolitical dynamics of civilization. These foundational experiences imprinted a robust ideology onto London, crafting a philosophy that intertwines with the narrative of *White Fang*. Working from the age of seven and as a runaway at fifteen sailing with a band of oyster pirates, he later found himself as a prospector in the Klondike, experiencing early the stark contrast between the artificial, hierarchical oppression within society and nature's impartial, brutal survivalism (Haley 37). The

protagonist, a wolf-dog hybrid navigating the complexities of wild and civilized worlds, becomes a metaphor for London's philosophical and existential explorations. White Fang's experiences vividly depict this dichotomy - he faces an equally ruthless and honest world in the wild, yet men exploit and brutalize him. London's perspective on survival, stitched together by threads of learned skill and instinct, guides the story. In his 2013 London biography, Earle Labor (76) posits that by navigating various roles in both wilderness and society, London found survival and his essence of being through adaptation and learning while adhering to a fundamental, instinctual understanding of justice and morality.

Civilization v. The Wild

Through London's vivid portrayal of White Fang's journey from the wild into human society, he explores societal structures and the inherent laws of nature. To illustrate, in the wild, meat is life, stating, "eat or be eaten," demonstrating a stark, straightforward principle of survival (53). Unlike human society, the wilderness operates on transparent and unswerving laws despite its apparent brutality. White Fang learns this unspoken rule as he observes, "The cub knew only that the sniff was strange, a something unclassified, therefore unknown and terrible - for the unknown was one of the chief elements that went into the making of fear" (London 43). In contrast with its complex structures, humankind can issue cruelty and benevolence simultaneously. While the wild is brutal and straightforward, society, although civil, depicts ethical dilemmas and hypocrisies. For instance, White Fang encounters both the malicious brutality of Beauty Smith and the compassionate warmth of Judge Weedon Scott. Professor of English Literature at the University of Reading, United Kingdom, Dr. Sue Walsh, establishes that White Fang's various human "masters" serve as metaphors for different facets of human society—exploitation, cruelty, and the capacity for empathy and kindness (61).

Further, London's worldview considers a contrast between the wilderness and civilization and the hierarchies inherent to both. His experiences during the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897 added to his appreciation and respect of nature's unforgiving, impartial "sledgehammer," as Labor describes, was a stark contrast to the imposed "classes" and injustices of society (98). Venturing into the dangerous terrain of the Yukon Territory, driven by the allure of prosperity and adventure, London did not strike gold in a literal sense but discovered a wealth of experiences that would thereafter shape his literary career. The grueling conditions, the struggle for survival amidst the savage cold, and the characters he met during this expedition profoundly influenced his understanding of nature and the human condition. Howard Bloom (2) supports that *White Fang's* journey between these realms embodies London's ongoing personal conflict and contradiction between a natural environment and humanity's façade.

Another example within this theme is *White Fang's* continual battle to survive against other wild creatures, such as his fight with Lip-lip and battle with the lynx. These encounters show an impartial, immoral brutality grounded purely in survival. Once *White Fang* similarly faces humankind and the "civilized" world, the brutality takes a different, morally corrupted form, an analysis confirmed by Mahady (1) and Walsh (73). In the novel, *White Fang* falls victim to human cruelty, demonstrated by Beauty Smith, who exploits and manipulates for profit and sadistic enjoyment. Unlike nature, where cruelty is a survival function, *White Fang* experiences brutality wielded for power and pleasure in civilization.

London's portrayal of the contradiction between civilization and the wild in *White Fang* expresses his worldview, particularly concerning human society and the natural world, showing a noticeable paradox in life experiences. Despite his deep appreciation for nature's impartial harshness, James Haley, historian, maintains that London consistently drew himself

back towards civilization, returning to the web of societal structures after his wilderness adventures (304). This tug of war between the harsh, isolated wilderness and the connected yet equally brutal civilized world underscores London's themes and ideas. Likewise, the book explores the concept of moral order—or lack thereof—in both domains. The wild adheres to an “amoral order not dictated by an internal compass” but by the sheer will to survive (Yang 45).

On the other hand, civilization introduces a moral attribute that people occasionally follow, sometimes ignore, and often manipulate, reflecting London's scrutiny of the societal structures of his time. Walsh notes that while White Fang lives by a straightforward survival code in the wild, exposure to human morality introduces him to a complex and sometimes even harsher code, “often ripe with contradiction” (62). It is not merely marrying the two worlds but a critique of the nature of survival and its morality in different contexts. Even as London repeatedly returns to civilization, there seems to be a critique of it ingrained within his work. As Yang further confirms, London's writings, specifically *White Fang*, explore and criticize London's world and the decisions he faces, intertwining his worldview and experiences within the descriptions of wilderness survival and societal complexity (45). Despite the stark settings of civilization and nature, London navigates through the details and brutalities of both, echoing his personal, tumultuous journey through the savage terrains of the Yukon and the equally challenging territories of societal and financial struggles. Thus, London in *White Fang* incorporates the stark contrast of nature's unforgiving cruelty to the equally harsh world of human civilization, components of his multi-faceted worldview.

Instinctual Survival v. Learned Skill

London also explores perspectives between innate intuition and learned behavior. Despite his domestication, White Fang's wild instincts persist, signaling London's view on the lasting impact of nature and birthright on character. Bloom confirms that this dual influence emphasizes London's exploration and fascination with one's identity, behavior, and destiny tied to instinct and external power (128, 132). The dog-man's primitive survival capabilities sharply contrast with learned behaviors, particularly those he acquires under the influence of human masters. These masters, each symbolizing different facets of society, provide distinct environments that consequently shape White Fang's behavior and outlook. His behavioral shifts with each change of environment underscore London's exploration of innate versus nurtured characteristics.

Furthermore, White Fang's relationship with his natural surroundings contrasts starkly with his human interactions. In the wild, Mahady states that instinctual survival mechanisms are primary and confirms that White Fang survives based on intrinsic predatory skills and a primal understanding of his environment (77-81). However, when thrust into the human space, particularly under the brutal teachings of Beauty Smith, Walsh (72) supposes that White Fang's wild instincts become suppressed, manipulated, and redirected to match London's observation about society. This comparison of environments explores how societal interaction and expectation can alter White Fang's instincts, corresponding with London's ideas on human nature and society.

London's life reveals a striking parallel to these themes. His adventures in the Yukon during the Klondike Gold Rush were a leap from his era's social norms and expectations. He witnessed and lived the ruthless laws of surviving the wild, where an impartial, cruel nature ruled (Labor 99-105). However, the wilderness never fully consumed London; instead, he consistently

re-emerged within society, like White Fang, who chose to reside in a human-dominated world despite his wild instincts. As Haley proves, London's writings, particularly *White Fang*, reveal a longing for the honesty of the wild and a reevaluation of the perceived moral corruption of society (228).

Lastly, White Fang's final respite as a domesticated being, despite the brutalities experienced there, could reflect London's contradictions and struggles with the civilized world and nature. Reesman maintains that London criticized societal structures but depended on them for his professional success and personal relationships as stability (79-82). The harsh objections of society apparent in *White Fang*, enriched by personal experience, showed a deeply-rooted skepticism toward society's rankings in London's worldview but also revealed and acknowledged there was an allure to both worlds existing personally and as White Fang.

Free Will v. Predestination

In penning *White Fang*, London also delves into the profound influence of environment on character and destiny, reflecting on the pivotal role of external circumstances in shaping life's trajectory. The transformation of White Fang from a wild creature to a domesticated companion shows London's belief in the permanent influence of one's surroundings – a certain “biological determinism,” where the environment molds one's character and destiny (Labor 146). White Fang's interactions with nature and human society continuously shaped his behavior and alignment, delivering character dynamics under environmental influences. Predestination versus free will is a theme heavily nested within the story and London's life. In support of this theme and a belief that his fate was one of perpetual hardship, Labor maintains that when writing *White Fang*, Jack London considered it a companion piece to the travails of *The Call of the Wild* (1903); he mired in the tragedy and triumph of the account (n1, n14). While different in their

narrative trajectories, the two books similarly explore the constant battle and integration between the primal and the developed, the individual and the collective. Yang agrees that both novels grapple with similar struggles between civilization and nature, instinctual survival versus abilities learned, predestination, and thriving within the laws of man and nature - all of which emulate London's life and worldview (45).

Additionally, Jack London's socialist leanings and ability to rise above socioeconomic boundaries attest to his belief in exercising free will amidst one's "deterministic constraints" (Haley xiv, 96). Just as *White Fang*, shaped by his inner instincts and environments, the author also exhibits moments of unexpected free will, defying his "natural" predispositions and the impositions of his surroundings. Yang again provides deep insight into this, confirming the psychological underpinnings of London's characters in the wild and exploring the intricacies of survivalism and morality. London's socialist beliefs, influenced by his encounters with class disparities and injustices, reflect a tension between collective structures and individual autonomy (Labor 146).

In a parallel depiction, *White Fang* shows the capacity for personal growth and transformation despite being bound by his environment's natural and societal laws. His journey from the ferocious wilderness to a domesticated environment reflects a transition and adaptation influenced not only by external circumstances but also by his intrinsic drive and evolving perceptions (Mahady 79, 88). In *White Fang*, the character is not a mere subject of the forces around him but an active participant, steering his destiny while navigating the predetermined worlds of the wild and civilization.

Moreover, through a lens of moral exploration, *White Fang*'s actions within the contradictions of the wild and civilized spheres are not merely survivalist but are also reflective

of intrinsic ethical frameworks. As Mahady explores, London's portrayal of interspecies ethics brings forth questions regarding morality amidst survivalism, revealing not only the brutal, impartial law of the wild but also the capacity for empathy, allegiance, and emotional complexity (78). White Fang's relationships with different people reflect not only the adaptability and resilience of his character but also the moral foundations of "civilized" human interaction - compared to nature's harsh code of ethics.

Despite the distinctions between the primal and the refined, London writes of a strong undercurrent of unity flowing through White Fang as a character. While representing nature's rawness, the wolf embraces distinctly human qualities - loyalty, love, and sacrifice (London 141-142). Much like London, who forged his path despite societal pressures, White Fang becomes a character influenced by and influencing the diverse circles in which he travels, not solely belonging to either, yet respecting and reflecting both. These analyses prove London's third worldview theme surrounding free will and life's fate.

Duality of Existence

Finally, London's worldview in *White Fang* includes subjects of redemption and transformation, demonstrating the potential for change and the healing power of kindness and love - tenets unfamiliar to the narrative. Labor asserts, however, that White Fang's ultimate transformation, marked by his bond with Judge Scott, symbolizes London's belief in second chances and the impactful force of compassion and understanding (15-16). Another example of London's dichotomous relationship between the two realms is White Fang's relationship with his mother, Kiche, who is both nurturing and a strict enforcer of survivalist norms - the savage and the civil existing together. Reesman asserts that White Fang's relationships in the wild build on respect, dominance, and survivalist pragmatism (16, 51-52). In the novel, his bond with his

mother is rooted in biological connection and an understanding of a “survivalist hierarchy,” which Yang determines is at the heart of London’s worldview regarding familial relationships, expressed through the wolf (44). There is purity and sincerity in these wild associations, although emphasized by primal and harsh rules, again a familiar echo of the author. London’s initial interpersonal interactions are likewise present in *White Fang*, particularly with those involving Gray Beaver. Mahady (79) claims these exchanges are transactional, adhering to a master-slave dynamic. *White Fang*’s relationship with Weedon Scott, however, breaks this mold. Scott’s compassion and genuine care toward *White Fang* show empathy and selflessness absent in the wild, revealing a potential for understanding within civilization when set against its harsh effects.

Additionally, physicality and instinct inherently connect survival mechanisms. *White Fang*’s keen hunting skills, cautious nature, and fierce fighting capabilities are survival tools refined in the wild. *White Fang* learns to navigate through different survival modes within human society. He knows to curb his wild instincts, adhere to the laws and norms imposed by human masters, and navigate through the physical and psychological abuses, not purely for survival but also within a framework of loyalty, obedience, and, occasionally, rebellion against mistreatment. Labor’s 2013 biographical critique agrees that London paints a stark and critical portrait of both worlds, reflecting his conflicting experiences and observations within societal and natural structures (207). While the wild is unrelenting and brutal, London portrayed it and civilization as equally devoid of moral guidance - corrupt, exploitative, cruel, and power-driven despite its potential for empathy, altruism, and relational bonds.

Lastly, in his relentless battle for survival against the wilderness, as in the fatal fight with Lip-lip and his battle with the lynx, these skirmishes are examples of the brutality grounded

purely in survival. Once White Fang encounters humanity and the “civilized” world, the viciousness takes a different, morally bankrupt form. Yang agrees that White Fang falls victim to the human capacity for cruelty, manifested by Beauty Smith, who exploits and manipulates for profit and sadistic enjoyment (43). Unlike nature, where cruelty is a survival function, White Fang experiences cruelty wielded for power and pleasure in civilization. London’s real-life experiences within the seemingly “civilized” society were again a parallel - as exploitation of power and economic struggles materialized during his time as a gold rush laborer (20-21, 33).

Analyzing the similarities between London’s life and the story of White Fang supports the idea that the novel mirrors London’s intricate worldview. Scholarship further confirms that the narrative displays four central themes containing London’s philosophy: 1) the dichotomy between civilization and the wild, 2) instinctual survival versus learned skill, 3) free will and predestination, and 4) the duality of existing in both civilized and natural worlds.

Accordingly, *White Fang’s* themes echo London’s life and ideology – marrying a nuanced worldview of living within civilization and nature. London immortalized his individual experiences and worldview within a compelling narrative that echoes the complexities of life.

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