

MAN AND NATURE IN “THE CALL OF THE WILD”

Extended Essay presented in

ENGLISH A2

**In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE DIPLOMA
from**

May 2004

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

Content	Page number
Abstract	2
Man and Nature in "The Call of The Wild"	3-10
Works Cited	11

Abstract:

This paper is concerned with only one of the issues “The Call of The Wild” raises: the source of the conflict between man and nature and the extent of this conflict. The paper claims that man’s assumption that he is superior to nature causes this conflict. Buck, once a dear pet of Judge Miller, goes through an evolution after he is sold to dog traders by a gardener. The world outside Judge Miller’s house is harsh and merciless. Buck’s confrontation with the world forces him to connect to his instincts and nature. The paper asserts that as the friendly dog Curly, the representation of culture, is killed by the husky horde, Buck is quick to notice the culture-nature conflict and adapt to it. One theme that plays a central role in his adaptation is the survival of the fittest – Buck realizes quickly that only the “fittest” survive. However, the definition of the “fittest” changes according to nature and culture. Buck is able to establish a genuine identity in all of this turmoil because he gains the freedom to express his “will to power” – a Nietzschean term whose implication is explored in the paper. The paper then draws a comparison with the movie “Tarzan the Ape Man” to show the intensity of the conflict between nature and culture, regarding Tarzan as a different reflection of nature-culture conflict. John Thornton is contrasted with Hal, Mercedes and Charles to show the different views of culture towards this conflict. The paper then concludes optimistically that Buck’s case shows that the conflict between man and nature can be minimized although it cannot be totally eliminated. However, Jack London is quiet about how to go about this minimization because he wants the critical reflection of his readers about this case without his intervention, hoping this will facilitate the process.

MAN AND NATURE IN "THE CALL OF THE WILD"

Nature has been a source of many unresolved and inexplicable questions to mankind. Jack London was one of the authors that tried to explain nature in relation to and within the context of culture. In his stories of animals such as "The White Fang" and "The Call of the Wild", he tried to unveil the relation between man and animal. This led to a wide exploration of the animals', especially wolves and dogs, traits that are analogous to man's traits. Although man's relation with nature has many substrata, a particular concept that interested Jack London was the conflict between man and nature. He profoundly addressed this question in "The Call of The Wild". Of course, one central question that comes to mind when evaluating this conflict within the context of the novella is *why and to what extent there is a clash between man and nature in "The Call of The Wild"*. I believe that Jack London has implied rather than specified an answer to this vital question – so by any means, there can be different approaches to this inquiry stemming from the interpretation of "The Call Of The Wild". My claim is basically that man's assumption that he is superior to nature and consequences of his consciousness such as culture cause a conflict between man and nature in "The Call Of the Wild."

Nature is a wide concept that must be narrowed down for the purpose of this essay. Nature denotes many things. Nature, by the word's very first implication, is *fauna and flora*. However, this basic implication is rather superficial and possesses very little significance. Simply the mathematical sum of all existences in nature doesn't cause a conflict with culture. The first issue that culture has with nature is that nature is incapable of any moral judgement. Nature is instinctive. For example, in "The Call of the Wild", Buck's desire to kill a moose at the end of the novel and therefore prove to himself his superiority is a natural desire. This vicious desire may be deemed evil from the culture's point of view because it lacks a purpose with substance- Buck is simply killing the moose for the sake of killing. However, such a behavior in nature is normal or even encouraged to intimidate the rivals of a beast. This disparity of two approaches reflects well an inherent conflict. Another example for this from "The Call of The Wild" is the death of Curly. Curly is a friendly female dog, whose friendly manners and decent conduct make her an ideal representation of culture. The other huskies, sensing her weakness, close in upon her and violently kill her. What makes Curly a feeble animal is her attachment to the morality of culture. The other huskies on the other hand are the ideal embodiments of nature. Jack London here juxtaposes nature, represented by the huskies, and culture, represented by Curly, to make the point that the fact that nature

transcends morality is often a basis for antagonism between man and nature. The reason is that man demands a firm *harmony*, a sort of a hierarchy of values, between living things (When established between humans, this harmony is called morality and when established between man and nature, it is called civilization.)

Nevertheless, the most important theme that encapsulates the soul of nature in “The Call of The Wild” is “the survival of the fittest”. Charles Darwin defined the natural selection (the term the survival of the fittest was later coined in by Herbert Spencer) as “the preservation of favorable variations and the rejection of injurious variations” (Darwin). Curly’s death can be explored with this perspective as well. Curly, the “injurious variation”, is eliminated by the “favorable variations”, the husky horde. The survival of the fittest is important in the sense that it highlights the way nature works. This also points out an interesting contrast. According to culture, the “favorable variation” would be Curly because she is domesticated and apt to be owned by any individual. On the other hand, the “injurious variation” would be the husky horde. The reason is that the husky horde is aggressive, liable to attack humans and nonconforming to culture man has established. These two forces, culture and nature, clash because they have opposite targets, as indicated by what they see as “injurious.”

Spitz’s laughter at Curly’s death and Buck’s reaction to this deserves a closer study in the sense that it displays a subtle form of conflict between nature and culture.

“But she lay there limp and lifeless in the bloody, trampled snow, almost literally torn to pieces...The scene often came back to Buck to trouble him in his sleep.... So that was the way. Once down, that was the end of you. Spitz...laughed... and from that moment Buck hated him with a bitter and deathless hatred.” (London 208)

Buck here realizes for the first time that the laws of nature differ from the laws of culture. Buck’s perspective here is widely influenced by culture’s values; his reactions are still shaped by morals of the house at Santa Clara valley. This can be deduced from the fact that the killing of Curly is a revelation to Buck. Death disturbs Buck here because he is still attached to the values of culture. Once he evolves later in the novel, death becomes a commonality for Buck. This is most explicitly revealed by his killing of the Indians at the end of the novel. This enormous transformation of Buck’s attitude towards death can only be explained in terms of his evolution. The writer Jack London seems to approve of this evolution, claiming that we assign fake identities to animals and that animals should be best left to evolve to find their natural identity. However, a darker implication is the application of the same argument to man; namely, that man should evolve to find his identity and should not

be bridled by culture. The details of this implication are out of the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say that the consequences of such a *free, wild* self-exploration will be unmanageable and that history has shown us that man always has to be limited by society's rules.

The reoccurrence of bad dreams in Buck's sleep simply shows the tension between nature and culture as these dreams are related with Buck's awareness of nature's cruelties: "The day had been long and arduous, and he slept soundly and comfortably, though he growled and barked and wrestled with bad dreams." (London page 210) This quote is right after Buck digs himself for the first time a hole in the snow to get sleep. The bad dreams show that Buck is uneasy and troubled. Buck's uneasiness and troubled state denote that he is having difficulty adjusting to nature and nature's laws. More importantly, it shows that the cultural values Buck possesses don't have any meaning when faced with the unforgiving nature; indeed, if the cultural essence that Buck had any value within the context of nature, then he could easily adopt himself. However, the trouble that Buck has to go through in order to adapt to nature shows that culture has *weakened* Buck.

An explicit conflict between culture and nature in the book is present in Buck's fight with Spitz. In this fight, Buck is not the "sated aristocrat" or the domesticated animal. He is a "dominant primordial beast". Spitz in this context is a tool Jack London uses to show his readers that Buck not only has adapted to the laws of nature but also has connected with his instincts. Spitz is depicted as a fierce, unmerciful epitome of nature. The defeat of this fierce, unmerciful beast serves as a breakthrough for Buck, who with this challenge makes it evident that he is moving towards his natural instincts from the morals of Judge Miller's house. What is interesting in Buck's struggle with Spitz is that Buck wants to kill Spitz, Buck wants to master, Buck wants to dominate. This shows that Buck is making progress in expressing his "will to power". This was a term coined in by the German philosopher Friederich Nietzsche. Nietzsche's idea of will to power was that "every specific body strives to become master over all space and to extend its force (-- its will to power) and to thrust back all that resists its extension" (Nietzsche). According to Nietzsche, the will to power is the driving force of every living thing. In other words, "life is simply will to power." (Nietzsche) Here we see that Buck defeats morality by expressing his "will to power".

At the beginning of the book, Buck's "will to power" is somehow quelled. He "rules" at Judge Miller's house but he doesn't have power nor does he feel the need to express his need for power. He is rather passive; his concentrated desire for power remains latent. Later, Buck ardently wants the leadership of the sled team and this shows that Buck has a vehement "will to power":

“Buck wanted it [the leadership]. He wanted it because it was his nature, incomprehensible pride of the trail and trace – that pride which holds dogs in the toil to the last gasp...” (London 222)

Once Buck kills Spitz, his pride in expressing in his “will to power” is even more apparent. The following quote demonstrates Buck’s metamorphosis and also juxtaposes culture’s values with nature’s values:

“Buck stood and looked on, the successful champion, the dominant primordial beast who had made his kill and found it good.” (London 228)

The point is that Buck actually finds his kill “good”. It shows that Buck is actually transforming into a beast from the tamed animal he was formerly. The relevance of this to the conflict between nature and culture is that it reflects a rather brutal portrait of nature, which is in discord with the representations of nature observed in culture – such as a beautiful painting of an elegant flower. The message here seems to be that in order for Buck to adapt to the conditions of nature, he has to leave behind the principles of culture and perhaps adopt new ones. This actually shows the intensity of the conflict between culture and nature because what nature demands in a particular situation is quite distinct from what culture demands in the same situation. Culture would demand Buck to remain moral at all costs, whereas nature allows Buck to fully explore his instincts. Also, the notion of culture bit by bit fades away from Buck because he is absorbed by his nature. The book simply asserts that one (animals or humans) cannot be dictated by nature and culture simultaneously. This claim though is open to evaluation. Humans weren’t always restricted by systems of values such as laws. Before the establishment of a competent jurisdiction system, mankind had some scope for expressing his instincts – his natural side – to great extents. However, although man had this scope, he still managed to form communities and eventually produce values such as morality. This shows that at some point in history, man naturally chose to rationalize himself. Nevertheless, the reader should be informed that the argument presented here is not concrete enough to support claims such as “man is naturally rational.”

This dilemma between culture and nature was explored with a similar perspective by the movie “Tarzan the Ape Man” (1932) -famous for “Me Tarzan. You Jane” line-, based on the character first created by the novelist Edgar Rice Burroughs. The movie tells of “the exciting story of a difficult African trek to the fabled elephants' burial grounds, where vast amounts of valuable ivory tusks are thought to be located.” (Dirks) In their mission to find ivory tusks, the adventurer James Parker, his close associate Harry Nolt and his daughter Jane Parker overcome many difficulties. Tarzan, an Ape-man, assists them in their glorious quest

to find the ivory tusks. Serendipitously, Jane and Tarzan develop a friendship that later evolves into love. Henry Nolt, who happens to be a lover of Jane, envies this attraction. When Jane expresses her concern for Tarzan, Harry Nolt, who has just failed to shoot Tarzan due to lack of ammunition, remarks: "Funny - extremely, that you should be considering the feelings of a man-ape. It's a pity I didn't put two bullets in the gun while I was at it, and finish the job." (Dirks) What is relevant in Harry Nolt's remark to "The Call of The Wild" is that he doesn't consider Tarzan as a human – he is just an animal that needs to be crushed by the forces of culture. This opinion is very similar to the opinion of Hal, Mercedes and Charles who see nature as something to be conquered. Buck at the beginning of the book was an animal so heavily influenced by culture that he lost his animalistic qualities, as implied by the "sated aristocrat" (London 198) metaphor. Tarzan presents an exactly opposite example. Tarzan is a human so severely affected by nature that he no longer retains his cultural identity. Both works do not present an in-between (culture and nature) state although I mentioned the possibility of such a state earlier. This again shows the kind of polarization that is involved in the clash, as reflected by these works, between nature and culture. "Tarzan The Ape" also reveals the different value hierarchy between nature and culture. Henry Nolt kills one of Tarzan's ape friends and in reaction Tarzan kills a native bearer. The following dialogue ensues:

Jane (to Harry as he cocks his gun): Oh Harry, Harry, you can't do that. He isn't a wild animal!...

Harry: He's a murderer.

Jane: But so are you to him when you killed that ape. (Dirks)

Now Tarzan sees Harry as a murderer because Harry killed an ape although Tarzan doesn't feel any sort of guilt or regret for killing a human. And Harry recognizes Tarzan as a murderer because he caused the death of a native although he does not see himself as a murderer. This discrepancy clouding the concept of "murder" is yet another proof that shows the great severity of the nature\culture polarization. The disagreement on even a concept such as murder reduces the hope of eliminating the tension between culture and nature. However, the movie like "The Call of the Wild" ends hopefully when Jane decides to live with Tarzan, indicating signs of a possible unification of nature and culture.

Similar to Jane who chooses nature, Buck chooses nature although he goes through an evolutionary process in making this choice. And the consequence of this choice is greater freedom for Buck. At the end of the book, Buck's victory over life –and maybe even culture– is enhanced with his greater scope of freedom. Jack London here communicates the point that

nature allows its species more freedom than culture does because in order to minimize conflicts, culture has to limit the extent to which the instincts can be expressed. Buck at the beginning of the book might have greater freedom than other dogs in Judge Miller's house. We can easily deduce this from the fact that he "plunged into the swimming tank"(London 198), "went hunting with Judge's sons" (London 198) and "escorted the Judge's daughters on long twilight or early morning rambles"(London 198) while other dogs are kept in kennels, never setting foot on the ground. However here, Buck doesn't have the important freedom of expressing his "will to power". He gains this later in the book, when he becomes a dominant beast.

Also important is Buck's reaction towards his memories. Buck remembers Judge Miller's house but the memories don't arouse anything in him. On the other hand, memories that display the vileness of nature and nature's laws do arouse Buck's interest:

"Sometimes he thought of Judge Miller's big house in the sun-kissed Santa Clara Valley, and of the cement swimming tank, and Ysabel, the Mexican hairless and Toots, the Japanese pug; but oftener he remembered the man in the red sweater, the death of Curly, the great fight with Spitz".

Buck's fading memories about culture and civilization compared to his fresh memories of nature make evident his metamorphosis into a "dominant primordial beast"(London 216). Another perspective that can be maintained is that nature is a much more vigorous, forceful element in Buck's life while on the other hand culture had dragged Buck into passivity. Simply, the invocations of culture echo in Buck's chaotic mind but "the call of the wild" suppresses it. The reason why nature's "call" is superior to the invocations of culture is that Buck's true identity is his natural side. Dogs were domesticated at some point in time but long before that, dogs were carnivorous animals, feeding on their prey.

Another moment in the book that reveals the source of the conflict between nature and culture is the scene in which Mercedes, Charles and Hal fall into where ice gives way:

"Suddenly, they saw its [the sled's] back end drop down, as into a rut, and the gee pole, with Hal clinging to it, jerk into the air.... They saw Charles turn and make one step to run back and the whole section of ice give way and dogs and humans disappear."

Here, the characters Mercedes, Charles and Hal represent culture. These characters actually do not possess the necessary respect for nature. Their inability to correctly ration food for the dogs, their unnecessary use of gun and knife and the excess load they put on the sled reflect this. The message here seems to be that nature will always defeat those who do not display the necessary respect for her. A counter example is John Thornton. John Thornton

displays the essential love and respect for nature, embodied by Buck and therefore gains the full espousal of nature. The relevance of this contrast between these characters (Mercedes, Charles, Hal and John Thornton) to the premises of the book is that this contrast shows two different views, held by man, towards nature. People like Charles, Mercedes and Hal do not grasp the basic idea that nature is independent from man and that it can exist on its own. Nature is not a toy whose primary purpose is to bring joy and comfort to mankind. What Charles, Hal and Mercedes cannot understand is that nature is a completely different phenomenon. It is finer than man's world because man also is a part of it - although often humans have the propensity to claim superiority over nature. Charles, Hal and Mercedes actually surmise that mankind is superior because it has consciousness. They believe that the ability to craft tools such as guns gives them the power to disdain and abuse nature. Jack London shows that this is only a very shallow, superficial way of thinking. In fact, this superficial attitude of individuals is also another source of the conflict between nature and culture. The author shows in this scene that this shallow thinking fails and nature prevails. The conclusion that so long as man cannot strip himself out of this superficial way of thinking, the conflict between man and nature will mount to greater, perilous extents follows easily.

Towards the end of the book, John Thornton is represented as the last bridge between civilization and Buck.

“It was the call, the many-noted call, sounding more luringly and compellingly than ever before. And as never before, he was ready to obey. John Thornton was dead. The last tie was broken.” (London 276)

Again, we see the element of culture fading away from Buck. In fact, this is the moment where that last bond with culture is torn asunder. What this scene reveals to us about Buck is that we finally learn that Buck was never able to “fit into” culture. Buck never found a suitable identity in culture. It seems as if culture assigns living things fake identities. When Buck lived in the “sun-kissed” (London 197) Santa Clara Valley, he was domesticated and he did not have to fight for survival. He was a “king” (London 198). However, nature doesn't identify Buck as a “king”. Buck is more likely to be a fierce and a brutal hunter –within nature- that is able to sustain himself rather than a “king” who needs other individuals to serve and support him.

Jack London demonstrated a complete understanding between nature and man by writing “The Call of The Wild.” This novel shows that the conflict between man and nature is central both to our understanding of ourselves and to our development. One of the ideas that

Jack London tries to explore is that we will never truly bridge the gap between nature and culture, as it is shown by Buck's difficulty in adapting to nature. Although the novel has been largely based on the conflict between nature and man, Jack London in a sense tries to reconcile himself this conflict by narrating the story of a dog that shows extremely humanlike qualities. Buck is after all the individual who achieves the impossible. In fact, even bits of Nietzsche's "Superman" can be traced in Buck. I think the reason why Jack London chose a dog that shows human qualities such as ambition is that he tried to eliminate some of our assumptions regarding nature (i.e. humans are superior to nature). His point seems to be that unless we eliminate some of these assumptions and replace them with well-thought ideas, we will literally go through a moral degrading – a complete mistrust and disrespect for nature and ourselves.

Although man can minimize this conflict through respect – as in the relationship between John Thornton and Buck -, Jack London's work remains ambiguous about to what extent this conflict can be minimized. Can this conflict be totally annihilated or will some portions of it remain with us forever? My personal belief is that since man has a unique identity, this conflict will remain relevant forever. However, Buck's story shows that this can be reduced to a great extent. Despite the fact that Jack London uses Buck as a medium for conveying a message about nature and man, he is not really consistent in his claims. For example, while implying that the conflict between man and nature should be ended, he strips Buck of any morality by letting him embrace his true identity. The question that we readers ultimately face is that if we were to take Buck as a model and strip ourselves of any morality, would this somehow contribute to the development of a harmony between man and nature? Obviously, the answer is not easy and wasn't resolved throughout the investigation of this research but still I believe that even Jack London himself did not have an answer for such a question.

It is clear now that Jack London has taken us through a blurry journey regarding the question of the conflict between man and nature. Jack London does a good job in identifying, refining and explicating this conflict – much of this essay has been influenced by Jack London's ideas regarding this conflict. However, he is, maybe even deliberately, unclear about proposing a solution or a method to deal with this conflict. The reason why London is unclear is that he wants to encourage the critical and meticulous reflection of his readers without his intervention. In this case, we as the readers of London are asked to be even more reflective about this issue. And maybe London's solution is the critical reflection of his readers.

Nature And Man

Word Count: 3911

Works Cited:

Darwin, Charles. "The Origin of Species." Literature.org. 29 June 1999. Knowledge Matters Ltd. 1 April 2003.

<<http://www.literature.org/authors/darwin-charles/the-origin-of-species/>>

Dirks, Tim. "Tarzan The Ape Man." Greatest Films. 2003. 12 November 2003.

<<http://www.filmsite.org/tarzB.html>>.

Grossman, Debra. "SparkNote on The Call of the Wild." Sparknotes.com. 2001. Barnes & Noble Learning Network. 28 May 2003. <<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/call>>.

The Jack London Collection. Ed. Roy Tennant. 13 January 2003. University of California Berkeley. 5 March 2003. <<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/London>>.

London, Jack. White Fang and The Call of the Wild. London: the Penguin Group, 1994.

Nietzsche, Friederich. "The Will to Power." Ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Random House Inc, 1968.

Reesman, Jeanne Campell. "Prospects for the study of Jack London." Project Muse. 2003. John Hopkins University. 30 March 2003.

<http://muse.jhu.edu/demo/resources_for_american_literary_study/25.2reesman.html>