

“背景中的文学”丛书

Understanding The Call of the Wild

A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources,
and Historical Documents

《野性的呼唤》解读

[美] 克劳迪娅·德斯特·约翰逊 著
(Claudia Durst Johnson)

The "Literature in Context" Series

UNDERSTANDING

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the Wild*

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Claudia Durst Johnson

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Preface

Jack London, an illegitimate child born in San Francisco in 1876 and reared in poverty across the bay in Oakland, California, had become the highest-paid, most widely read, and best-known writer in America by the time he was thirty-seven years old. In part, London achieved such tremendous popularity because he was the quintessential American adventurer, a westerner living in a country that culturally thrived on and was identified with exploration of unknown territory. He lived an adventurous life and then used events from his own life as fodder for his profession as a writer. At the early age of fifteen, he bought a small boat and embarked on an illegal and dangerous career as an "oyster pirate," raiding other men's lucrative oyster beds in San Francisco Bay. Then he joined the other side of the law in an equally hazardous job, helping the California Fish Patrol capture commercial fishermen plying their trade illegally in the bay. At seventeen, he signed on as an able-bodied seaman for a perilous seven-month seal-hunting expedition in the Pacific Ocean, a journey that took him to Hawaii, Siberian Russia, and Japan, where he and the rest of the crew almost lost their lives in a treacherous typhoon. In 1894, at eighteen, he hoboed across the country, on foot and in boxcars, as part of a social protest by a group of unemployed men who called themselves "Kelly's Army." Passing through Erie County, Ohio, on this

trek, he was arrested for vagrancy and served time in a penitentiary. After his release, he made his way up the east coast and then returned to California across Canada by coal car and down from Vancouver by ship, earning his way by stoking coal.

Two years later, in 1897, at the age of twenty-one, he set sail for Juneau, Alaska, to join the great rush for gold in the Yukon, a journey that required climbs over jagged, icy peaks and down treacherous rapids just to reach the gold fields. After enduring a bitter subarctic winter there digging for instant wealth, in late spring, while suffering from scurvy, he rafted down the Yukon River on his way back home to California. These adventures, especially his Yukon experience, narrated to the public in his writings, made him an international hero whose escapades were often newspaper headlines.

The publication that first brought Jack London worldwide fame and continues to be his best-known work is a short novel whose main character is a Yukon sled dog named Buck. That work, begun in December 1902 and published in 1903, was entitled *The Call of the Wild*.

London had earlier written a short story entitled "Bâtard," in which a demonic dog kills his equally demonic owner. London originally saw the story of the noble, sympathetic Buck as his apology for having written "Bâtard." He planned it as a 4,000-word short story for a magazine. But the project soon overtook him, as he described it. In the two months it took him to write it, it grew to a 27,000-word novel. The result was an indisputable classic.

The success of this novel, which appeared serially in the *Saturday Evening Post* and was published as a book by the Macmillan Company, has been nothing short of phenomenal. On July 1, 1903, the day of its publication, 10,000 copies were sold. Within the first forty-three years of its publication, 6 million copies were sold in the United States alone. Furthermore, the book was even more widely read and acclaimed in countries outside the United States. At the end of the twentieth century, it has been translated into some ninety foreign languages. The novel has sold better and has gone through more printings in France and Germany than in the United States, is one of the most popular American books read in China and Japan, and is the most widely read American book in Russia. The total sales throughout the world, counted in the tens of millions, have made it an international best-seller of all time.

Like Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* is one of those books that is usually encountered in youth and has a profound, lifelong effect on its readers. It has been called an adventure story, a romance, a realistic nature story, a dog story, a historical or cultural treatise, and an allegory or myth. It holds special appeal for those who know and love dogs and for those who know and love nature and the wilderness. It also appeals to those who yearn for a special kind of freedom that can only be found outside of society's constraints. The adventurer in its readers respond to the novel whether the unknown land they would explore is an icy wilderness near the Arctic Circle or some compelling psychological and mythic frontier within human beings themselves.

The following study is intended to provide greater understanding of *The Call of the Wild* by placing it in the context of the events and ideas of the era of its setting and by examining the abiding issues that it raises. The first chapter, a literary analysis, is intended to help the reader achieve a firm grasp of the novel's structure and meaning. The remainder of the volume is devoted to inquiring into the context against which the novel was written and the issues it raises. Few novels have been so decidedly shaped by the geography in which they occur—in this case the Alaskan Panhandle and the Yukon Territory, which determine the course of Buck's life. The second chapter explores that subarctic land, utterly unknown to most readers in 1903. The third chapter is devoted to the event that shapes the novel—the Klondike gold rush of 1897–98. The fourth chapter focuses on the species to which the main character of the novel belongs—the dog. Special attention is given to the sled dog that predominated in the Yukon during the gold rush. The fifth chapter examines one of the issues raised by the novel: the brutality of the sled dog's life and cruelty to animals in general at the time of the novel's setting. The sixth and final chapter studies a creature central to the novel—the wolf. Moreover, this discussion of the wolf and all he represents raises the ongoing issue of the environment and mankind's foolish attempt to pursue comfort and riches by decimating the wilderness.

Among the contextual materials included on the Yukon itself are reports of nineteenth-century explorations documenting its brutal climate and terrain. In the third chapter, the gold rush is illuminated by newspaper accounts, advertisements, guidebooks, poetry,

and memoirs of those who were on the spot. The chapter on the sled dog contains an excerpt from a history of dogs, descriptions of breeds important to the novel, memoirs of those who traveled by dogsled, and a newspaper report of the great diphtheria run of 1925. Chapter Five, on the issue of cruelty to animals, includes excerpts from the Bible, memoirs of Yukoners recalling the cruelty there to dogs and horses, a brief selection from the famous animal novel *Black Beauty*, and the mission statement of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), a current society for the prevention of cruelty to animals. The final chapter, on the wolf, contains excerpts from colonial laws setting up bounties for wolves, a passage showing attitudes toward wolves, and deliberations in the U.S. Congress on the endangered wolf.

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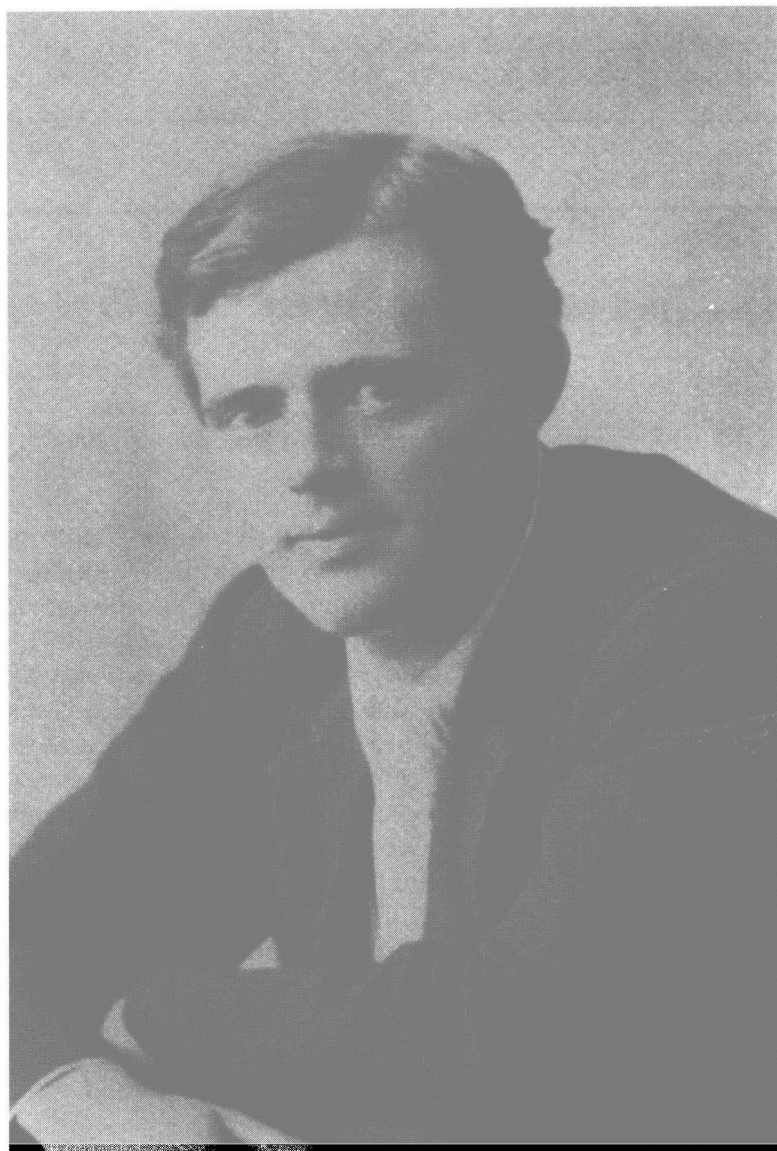
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Literary Analysis: Adventure and Myth

In August 1896, a group of prospectors in the Yukon Territory hit what would prove to be the richest lode of gold in the world. This discovery soon drew hundreds of thousands of people to a gold rush in the frozen north. Eleven months later, in July 1897, Jack London, then a poor twenty-one-year-old with literary ambitions, left his home in Oakland, California, to join the hordes seeking fortune and adventure on the Klondike River. The Yukon in those days was filled not only with fortune hunters, but with dogs, for dogs were the only means of transportation over the ice and snow. London and his party camped near the Yukon city of Dawson, at the center of gold-rush fever, and frequently visited with the Bond brothers, friends from northern California who had also come to mine for gold. London took a special liking to a big dog named Jack, a cross between a St. Bernard and a shepherd, owned by Marshall Bond. Five years after he had returned from the Yukon and had launched his career as a writer, he published his most popular work, *The Call of the Wild*, about a dog named Buck inspired by his friend's dog, Jack.

AMBIGUITIES

The Call of the Wild is a clear, straightforward narrative of the travails of the dog Buck, whose buried ancestral song leads him to



Jack London. Photo Collections, The Bancroft Library.

return to uncivilized nature to join an arctic wolf pack. Yet the direct, forthright narrative conceals a multilayered message, its complexity reaching to self-contradiction at times. For example, the novel is decidedly naturalistic in its unflinching descriptions of the raw and bloody brutality of nature, in scenes that are painful to read: the vicious beating of Buck by a man in red; the deaths of Curly, a naive and friendly Newfoundland killed by vicious huskies, and Spitz, the untrustworthy lead dog killed by his own team; the attack on the dog team by starved huskies; and the beating of Buck by Hal, one of the incompetents who buys the dog team—to cite a few of many such episodes. At the same time, as London critics Earle Labor and Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin have observed,¹ the book can be classified as a romance, in that running through it is an affirmation of the spiritual center of all nature. An anthropomorphic (humanlike) Buck, for example, listens to the ancestral voices of a long-dead but lingering past, calls that arise from spirit and from instinct. The romantic, that is to say, spiritual dimension of the novel is also evident in the ascending and ultimately dominant quality of myth, concluding at last in Buck's transformation into "the Ghost Dog" as he fuses with the invisible ancestral past.

On a more mundane level, the naturalistic story shows people and creatures ineluctably caught in the grip of forces over which they have no control: natural law, economic imperatives, and deep-seated psychological drives. At the same time, we also see Buck acting as if he is in control, a creature of strength, as when he cunningly resists the French-Canadians' efforts to deny him a place at the head of the team, thus illustrating the rise of the strong, the clever, "the fittest" in the primordial wild. Later, he seems instinctively to understand John Thornton's words urging him to pull out the heavy sled frozen to the ice for no reason except to settle a wager.

Further ambivalence is shown in the thematic celebration of rugged individualism, at one extreme, and the team, where individualism is submerged into that of the group, at the other extreme. The dog Buck himself is something of a contradiction in terms. He is both heroic and demonic, viciously running down and wounding the treacherous lead dog Spitz before offering him to the pack to be killed, but later heroically risking his own life to save his master John Thornton in treacherous river rapids. He quickly

learns to dispense with civilization's moral law. Still, he continues to exhibit qualities of heroism, love, and self-sacrifice, things that transcend moral law, issuing, as they do, from within himself rather than from civilized institutions.

In Buck, civilization itself comes to be suspect. The ultimate comforts and the good life of civilization with all its attendant pleasures are shown in the life of the dog on Judge Miller's ranch. Yet Buck, feeling the slow, insinuating appeal of the brutal world of nature, comes at last to reject all civilization.

London said that he wrote the book simply as the story of an admirable dog who returns to the wild, but later acknowledged the validity of multiple layers of meaning that readers discovered in his account and that literary scholars have explored repeatedly over the years. In attempting to understand *The Call of the Wild*, one needs to look at these several stories on various levels in the novel. The first is clearly a gripping nature or dog story. The second is an allegory of human psychology and behavior. Finally, there is the mythic story of the archetypical hero. These three overlapping levels can be labeled, in increasing order of complexity, as animal, human, and myth.

THE SETTING

The setting for the main action, the Yukon Territory of Canada and Alaska in 1897, a wild, largely unexplored, and uncivilized world of raw nature, places the novel, on one level, in the category of nature book. The geography is as precise and accurate as that of a travel book and can be easily plotted on a map of the region. The action begins on a ranch in Santa Clara, California, forty-four miles south of San Francisco, near the city of San Jose. From there, Buck is taken by railroad to San Francisco. After one night in a wharfside saloon in the city, he is taken by ferry across the Bay of San Francisco to Oakland and then north parallel to San Pablo Bay. A ferry takes him across the Carquinez Strait, where he again is placed on a railway car to Seattle, Washington. From Washington State, he is taken in the ship *Narwhal* across the northern Pacific Ocean and up Queen Charlotte Sound to the port of Dyke, just across from Skagway, Alaska.

The runs that Buck makes with the dogsled teams are between Skagway and Dawson, a journey that takes him out of Alaska into