

## The Theme of Environmental Determinism in Jack London's White Fang

Quinn Brian

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# The Theme of Environmental Determinism in Jack London's *White Fang*

Brian Quinn

*White Fang* is one of London's finest literary achievements. Published in 1906, at the height of his literary career, it soon won both popular and critical success. It is a wonderfully written epic novel of life in the northern wilderness. It combines all the qualities that London is best known for: romantic adventure, the harshness of nature, and his brand of rugged individualism. Originally intended as a "companion-book" to his popular novel *The Call of the Wild*, London writes an entirely different kind of story which he uses to showcase his various theories of environmental determinism.

Jack London was an American novelist and short story writer who at the beginning of the 20th century was the most famous and most highly paid writer of his day. Despite his popularity, he was not generally considered to be a particularly good writer, either by the critics of his time or by those of successive generations. In fact, he hurriedly produced so many lifeless stories for serialization in magazines that the term "hack" was even applied to him on numerous occasions. However, over the years there has been renewed interest in the works of Jack London along with a more positive reappraisal of his accomplishments.

As a writer he was simple, direct and to the point, while at the same time he was often clumsy in his usage and frequently repetitious. It is clear, however, that he did possess a touch of genius which, on occasion, can be found in some of his more memorable stories. He preferred to use strong words rather than precise language. He tried to keep the author out of his stories and instead let the characters tell the stories themselves by their own deeds and actions. Yet, in his poorer works he often reverted to moralizing and preaching. His works and style are often said to have been a great influence on Ernest Hemingway, who later perfected

London's style of simplicity and strong language.

London wrote too much and revised too little. He was seldom careful with his work. The first draft was usually the final draft. However, London did have one major message to deliver and that was his philosophy of atavism, or the constant reappearance in an individual of some characteristics found in a remote ancestor but not in closer ancestors. London was able to present this message with a fair amount of success in his two most well know works set during the days of the Alaskan Gold Rush: *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*.

Another major theme of his works is violence. The characters in his stories, including both men and animals, all live by violence and the world as such for London is nothing more than a testing ground for the strong.

London was, no doubt, also influenced by naturalism and he tried to emulate Zola in several of his works, most notably in *People of the Abyss* (1903), which is a sociological study about the worst areas of poverty in London. However, even though certain naturalistic elements can always be found in his works there is also a strong sense of romantic adventure as well and thus it is not possible to classify him as merely a "naturalist". Watson remarks that: "Although the environmental theme is prominent throughout the novel, London's naturalism is not always so strident. Heredity and environment, though important, are not the sole determinants of animal and human behavior. In fact, the crucial movement toward civilization entails, ironically, an act of free choice, and *White Fang's* 'bondage' in the world of men contrasts with his freedom in the wild. What pervades the novel is not so much a pure naturalistic determinism as a more flexible view with the imperatives of heredity and environment tempered by the whims of chance and the recognition of free will." (Watson, p.91) We therefore observe that London continually combines his naturalistic impressions with highly individualistic and romantic elements throughout this novel, as well as in many of his other works..

London's most famous work is probably *The Call of the Wild* (1902) which is the story of how a dog reverts from civilization to eventually

become the leader of a pack of wolves in the Alaskan wilderness. The story itself is told from the point of view of the dog Buck, and also contains a good deal of sentimentalism. However, it is also filled with a great amount of brutal viciousness and total disregard for the value of human life. For the protagonist, Buck, there is only one important thing that counts throughout the novel, namely, survival. In *The Call of the Wild* the law of the "club and the fang" is always the predominant element. Kill or be killed is the ever present reality that Buck takes with him through his series of adventures until finally he is released from any further hold that civilization once had on him when his last master perishes. At the end of the story, Buck has not only joined the wolf pack, but he has become one of them in heart and soul.

In *The Call of the Wild* London describes the steps by which a tame or civilized dog retraces his evolutionary steps until he returns to his original primitive state. On the other hand, in *White Fang* (1906) the process is reversed. A half-wolf rises from his wild, primitive state and gradually is tamed by civilization. Written as an antithesis and companion piece to *The Call of the Wild*, in *White Fang* London shows the evolution of a half-breed wolf-dog.

As in the earlier novel, the dominant concept in *White Fang* is survival of the fittest. The ability of the "animal" or "person" to adapt to new and different surroundings constitutes the essential plot of both works. This constant theme can best be described as London's theory of "environmental determinism", whereby all men and animals are considered to be completely shaped and molded by the circumstances of life and their surroundings and thus have little personal choice in the development of their own character or nature. Using this theory London also continually depicts nature as a vast force that is utterly hostile to men.

*White Fang* is an enthralling story which is written in a naturalistic style similar to *The Call of the Wild*. The first three chapters of *White Fang* are unique, however, in the fact that they overtly have nothing whatsoever to do with the story that follows. These pages are simply used by the author to set the mood for the novel and to introduce his

environmental theme. Watson notes that: "The environmental theme is signaled at the outset in the marvelous description of the frozen Northland. The landscape paradoxically combines a foreboding animism with a sinister desolation, as if the ghostly atmosphere and demonic laughter were meant to suggest a kind of limbo, somewhere between life and death." (Watson, p.93) This image is vividly portrayed by the author in the opening paragraph:

Dark spruce forest frowned on either side the frozen waterway. The trees had been stripped by a recent wind of their white covering of frost, and they seemed to lean toward each other, black and ominous, in the fading light. A vast silence reigned over the land. The land itself was a desolation, lifeless, without movement, so lone and cold that the spirit of it was not even that of sadness. There was a hint in it of laughter, but of a laughter more terrible than any sadness — a laughter that was mirthless as the smile of the Sphinx, a laughter cold as the frost and partaking of the grimness of infallibility. It was the masterful and incommunicable wisdom of eternity laughing at the futility of life and the effort of life. It was the Wild, the savage, frozen-hearted Northland Wild. (p.1)

(Hereafter, all quotations are taken from the *White Fang*, Dover Publications, Inc., New York 1991, edition)

These chapters tell the story of two men out in the frozen Alaskan wilderness who are surrounded by starving wolves while they try to return to a safe camp with their cargo by dog sled. These two men, Bill and Henry, represent the human race. The wilderness is depicted by the cunning wolves who represent the forces of nature. We thus observe how nature is continually trying to destroy mankind. Bill is an impatient man who finally rushes out to fight the wolves and is devoured. On the other hand, Henry is a patient man who carefully waits for nature to attack him and then uses fire, one of the great powers of nature, to hold off the wolves until he is finally rescued. In these brief chapters the author

demonstratively shows how savagery is fought with savagery in the wilderness.

The first stark example of the author's theory of environmental determinism can be seen in this part of the story where the two men are carrying a cargo consisting of a deceased rich man named Lord Alfred. London is quick to inform the reader that Lord Alfred was a man whom nature had defeated and the author called this phenomenon "the law of nature":

"On the sled, in the box, lay a third man whose toil was over, — a man whom the Wild had conquered and beaten down until he would never move or struggle again. It is not the way of the Wild to like movement. Life is an offense to it, for life is movement; and the Wild aims always to destroy movement. It freezes the water to prevent it running to the sea; it drives the sap out of the trees till they are frozen to their mighty hearts; and most ferociously and terribly of all does the Wild harry and crush into submission man — man, who is the most restless of life, ever in revolt against the dictum that all movement must in the end come to the cessation of movement." (pp.2-3)

As we can see from this rather startling introduction the dead man was simply incapable of adapting and the author insinuates that all such men are destined to perish in the wilderness. In these three brief chapters one of London's objectives is to show the constant conflict between man and primitive beasts. The author shows how animals are extremely cunning in their savagery, which can be seen particularly in the way that one she-wolf is able to steadily lure off the male dogs, one by one until they are trapped and eaten by the wolf pack. In addition, the desolation and isolation of the wilderness is shown to be in direct conflict with the intelligence of man.

Part two of the novel shifts the narrative suddenly to the perspective of the previously mentioned she-wolf who had earlier tracked the two men and soon after becomes the mother of *White Fang* after the birth of

5 cubs. A famine comes to the region and slowly all the cubs die off one by one except for one gray wolf cub, White Fang. He is the strongest of the litter. Thus London immediately shows how, right from birth, life in the wild is a continual fight for survival. As a baby, the cub soon learns his first lesson: "eat or be eaten, kill or be killed" which London calls "the law of meat":

"He began to accompany his mother on the meat-trail, and he saw much of the killing of meat and began to play his part in it. And in his own dim way he learned the law of meat. There were two kinds of life, —his own kind and the other kind. His own kind included his mother and himself. The other kind included all live things that moved. but the other kind was divided. One portion was that his own kind killed and ate. This portion was composed of the non-killers and the small killers. The other portion killed and ate his own kind, or was killed and eaten by his own kind. And out of this classification arose the law. The aim of life was meat. Life itself was meat. Life lived on life. There were the eaters and the eaten. The law was: EAT OR BE EATEN. He did not formulate the law in clear, set terms and moralize about it. He did not even think the law; he merely lived the law with out thinking about it at all." (pp.49-50)

In part three of the story the cub and mother wander into an Indian camp where she is recognized by an Indian named Gray Beaver as his brother's formerly domesticated wolf-dog. The two are taken in by the Indian as his own and White Fang thereafter has to adapt and learn how to function in the presence of the Indians. In addition, his mother is constantly tied up so he must also quickly learn how to protect himself against the other puppies. Due to the circumstances he soon learns how to fight and fend for himself quite capably:

"The effect of this was to rob White Fang of much of his puppyhood and to make him in his comportment older than his age. Denied the

outlet, through play, of his energies, he recoiled upon himself and developed his mental processes. He became cunning; ... He learned to sneak about camp, to be crafty, to know what was going on everywhere, to see and to hear everything and to reason accordingly, and successfully to devise ways and means of avoiding his implacable persecutor." (pp.60-61)

When after a few weeks his mother is sold to another Indian by his master, Gray Beaver, White Fang attempts to follow her, but is then severely beaten by Gray Beaver for disobeying him, and thus White Fang quickly learns another lesson, namely, to always obey the "man-god" who is all powerful:

"But the gods are accustomed to being obeyed, and Gray Beaver wrathfully launched a canoe in pursuit. When he overtook White Fang, he reached down and by the nape of the neck lifted him clear of the water. He did not deposit him at once in the bottom of the canoe. Holding him suspended with one hand, with the other he proceeded to give him a beating. And it was a beating. His hand was heavy. Every blow was shrewd to hurt; and he delivered a multitude of blows." .... "In that moment White Fang's free nature flashed forth again, and he sunk his teeth into the moccasined foot. The beating that had gone before was as nothing compared with the beating now received.... White Fang did not repeat his attack on the foot. He had learned another lesson of bondage. Never, no matter what the circumstance, must he dare bite the god who was lord and master over him;" (pp.62-63)

Throughout his life at the camp the little cub was constantly bullied and attacked by the other dogs, and especially by one dog in particular, Lip-lip. Due to Lip-lip's continual attacks White Fang through necessity becomes conditioned to constant fighting and these repeated attacks soon mold White Fang into a fierce creature while deftly mastering the art of "keeping one's feet":

“Out of this pack-persecution he learned two important things: how to take care of himself in a mass-fight against him; and how, on a single dog, to inflict the greatest amount of damage in the briefest space of time. To keep one’s feet in the midst of the hostile mass meant life, and this he learned well. He became cat-like in his ability to stay on his feet.” (p.65)

His new life seems fair and he is at peace with himself, however, when the Indian camp prepares to move for the winter White Fang suddenly feels the call of nature and runs away into the forest to once again be free. After a short time in the wild, however, he is suddenly stuck by an intense felling of loneliness and frantically tries to find his master again who has already moved on down the river with the rest of the village. Luckily White Fang finds the village and returns to his master fully expecting a severe beating but to his surprise the master is happy to see him. This experience teaches the wolf that although he may sometimes hear nature’s call he will hereafter stay and rely on the man-gods and it is precisely at this moment that the young wolf essentially rejects the Wild:

“Gray Beaver ordered meat to be brought to him, and guarded him from the other dogs while he ate. After that, grateful and content, White Fang lay at Gray Beaver’s feet, gazing at the fire that warmed him, blinking and dozing, secure in the knowledge that the morrow would find him, not wandering forlorn through bleak forest-stretches, but in the camp of the man-animals, with the gods to whom he had given himself and upon whom he was now dependent.” (pp.71-72)

In this section we can clearly see how the innocent little cub was steadily transformed into a crafty animal continually on guard and ready to attack. As time goes by in the Indian camp White Fang begins to forget nature and acclimate himself to his new life. After a number of

adventures he comes to make a covenant, or a personal treaty of sorts, with his Indian master:

“The months went by, binding stronger and stronger the covenant between dog and man. This was the ancient covenant that the first wolf that came in from the Wild entered into with man. And, like all succeeding wolves and wild-dogs that had done likewise, White Fang worked the covenant out for himself. The terms were simple. For the possession of a flesh-and-blood god, he exchanged his own liberty. Food and fire, protection and companionship, were some of the things he received from the god. In return, he guarded the god’s property, defended his body, worked for him, and obeyed him.” (p.77)

At the end of this section London makes his strongest case that White Fang was a total creature of his environment and circumstances. White Fang has now become the strongest dog of the village and London indicates that the animal had not become so out of any intention or volition but merely out of necessity which the author attributes to fate, destiny and circumstance:

“Not for nothing had he first seen the light of day in a lonely lair and fought his first fights with the ptarmigan, the weasel, and the lynx. And not for nothing had his puppyhood been made bitter by the persecution of Lip-lip and the whole puppy-pack. It might have been otherwise, and he would have been otherwise. Had Lip-lip not existed, he would have passed his puppyhood with the other puppies and grown up more dog-like and with more liking for dogs. Had Gray Beaver possessed the plummet of affection and love, he might have sounded the deeps of White Fang’s nature and brought up to the surface all manner of kindly qualities. But these things had not been so. The clay of White Fang had been molded until he became what he was, morose and lonely, unloving and ferocious, the enemy of all his kind.” (p.91)

In part four of the story, when White Fang is now almost fully grown, Gray Beaver goes to a nearby fort to sell his furs and there White Fang soon becomes famous for his ferocious ability to kill other dogs that had been foolishly sent to attack him by vicious owners. Because of this amazing ability to defeat any animal that dares to attack him, White Fang is soon actively sought after by an ugly and evil man, ironically named Beauty Smith, who using trickery and alcohol is able to finally trick Gray Beaver into selling White Fang to him. Smith represents all that is evil in mankind, including deceit and cruelty. Smith soon forces White Fang to fight other dogs so that Smith can win bets. For awhile White Fang is unbeatable and gains fame as the strongest fighter in Alaska, however, finally in a fight with a bulldog, White Fang loses and is at the point of being killed when a man, named Weedon Scott, who is the antithesis of Smith and represents all that is good in human nature, stops the fight, pays off Beauty Smith for the dog and takes White Fang home with him.

This section of the story is the most violent and cruel. We see White Fang being constantly tortured and brutalized by his owner and his only means of survival is to ferociously destroy all of the animals that come forth to challenge him. Here the author shows that in order to survive White Fang must stoop to the animalistic level of his oppressive new owner. However, we also see the heroic power of the wolf to never give up in the most unbearable of situations.

Interestingly, in London's theory of environmental determinism his belief that the environment molds the individual is attributed to men as well as to animals. Even though the cruel owner, Beauty Smith, is the epitome of evil, the author does not personally blame or hold him responsible for his actions:

"In short, Beauty Smith was a monstrosity, and the blame of it lay elsewhere. He was not responsible. The clay of him had been so molded in the making." (p.93)

London later reiterates the same idea to further confirm the fact that Smith was not ultimately responsible for his own actions:

“But Beauty Smith had not created himself, and no blame was to be attached to him. He had come into this world with a twisted body and a brute intelligence. This had constituted the clay of him, and it had not been kindly molded by the world.” (p.96)

The author thus tries to rationalize the actions of both Smith and White Fang in order to demonstrate that neither are thus individually guilty for having become wild beasts.

In Part 5, the last part of the story, we slowly see a catharsis take place in White Fang and under the protection, patience and compassion of his kind new owner, Weedon Scott, White Fang gradually learns, for the first time, to completely appreciate a human being, and ultimately comes to possess an undying love and affection for his new master and the author attributes this change in the wolf's soul to the “power of love”:

“He talked softly and soothingly, with a gentleness that somehow, somewhere, touched White Fang. In spite of himself and all the pricking warnings of his instinct, White Fang began to have confidence in this god. He had a feeling of security that was belied by all his experience with men. (p.115)

Eventually Scott has to leave Alaska and return to his home in California. At first he intends to leave White Fang behind since he is afraid that the animal could never get used to such a different climate, but White Fang escapes and sneaks aboard his master's ship. Scott, thus, owing to the animal's loyalty and devotion, finally decides to take the dog along.

In this section we see how love and a sense of loyalty have now completely transformed White Fang into an intelligent yet thoroughly domesticated animal. His former hatred for men and all living things has

now grown into a kind and gentle new outlook on life for the animal and London thus shows how for White Fang the “reign of hate” has finally ended:

“It was the beginning of the end for White Fang — the ending of the old life and the reign of hate. A new and incomprehensibly fairer life was dawning. It required much thinking and endless patience on the part of Weedon Scott to accomplish this. And on the part of White Fang it required nothing less than a revolution. He had to ignore the urges and promptings of instinct and reason, defy experience, give the lie to life itself.” (p.117)

At this point in the novel London again repeats how fate and destiny have molded and remolded White Fang into what he has finally become while labeling such destiny the “thumb of circumstance”:

“At that time he was a mere puppy, soft from the making without form, ready for the thumb of circumstance to begin its work upon him. But now it was different. The thumb of circumstance had done its work only too well. By it he had been formed and hardened into the Fighting Wolf, fierce and implacable, unloving and unlovable. To accomplish the change was like a reflux of being, and this when the plasticity of youth was no longer his; when the fiber of him had become tough and knotty;” ... “Yet again, in this new orientation, it was the thumb of circumstance that pressed and prodded him, softening that which had become hard and remolding it to fairer form. Weedon Scott was in truth his thumb. He had gone to the roots of White Fang’s nature, and with kindness touched to life potencies that had languished and well-nigh perished. One such potency was love. It took the place of like, which latter had been the highest feeling that thrilled him in his intercourse with the gods.” (pp.117-118)

After returning to California White Fang ultimately is even able to

win the affection of the entire Scott family because of his intelligence by first saving his master's life after leading some men to rescue him and then finally by risking his life to save his master's father, Judge Scott, from being murdered by an escaped convict Jim Hall. In this chapter we see London make one final time attempt to pedagogically explain his theme of environmental determinism by describing in detail how society had molded Jim Hall into a fierce animal like human being. London attributes Hall's nature as well to the "thumb of circumstance" and thus also believes that Hall should not, in principle, be held responsible for his heinous actions:

"It was about this time that the newspapers were full of the daring escape of a convict from San Quentin prison. He was a ferocious man. He had been ill-made in the making He had not been born right, and he had not been helped any by the molding he had received at the hands of society. The hands of society are harsh, and this man was a striking sample of its handiwork. He was a beast — a human beast, it is true, but nevertheless so terrible a beast that he can best be characterized as carnivorous.

In San Quentin prison he had proved incorrigible. Punishment failed to break his spirit. He could die dumb-mad and fighting to the last, but he could not live and be beaten. The more fiercely he fought, the more harshly society handled him, and the only effect of harshness was to make him fiercer. Straitjackets, starvation, and beatings and clubbings were the wrong treatment for Jim Hall; but it was the treatment he received. It was the treatment he had received from the time he was a little pulpy boy in a San Francisco slum — soft clay in the hands of society and ready to be formed into something." (p.146)

The clear parallels in this passage between Jim Hall and *White Fang* are self-evident. However, the section of the novel proves to be the weakest and most artificially contrived as the author once again tries to reaffirm his social thesis of environmental determinism.

The novel ends showing how White Fang has now learned to exist as a completely domesticated animal on a big California ranch, which ironically is strikingly reminiscent of the idyllic paradise that Buck had left behind when he was first kidnaped and taken on his journey to the North in *The Call of the Wild*.

Many critics have said that in *White Fang* London was unable to reach the same literary level of excellence that had been created in *The Call of the Wild* and Horowitz has noted that: "*White Fang*, however, lacked the mythopoeic vision of the former book, and, though well written and a wonderful novel in itself, was unable to transcend its subject. It remains more a sociological fable built upon ideas rather than an overwhelming vision. *White Fang*, representing the tried-and-true dog domesticated by the love of civilized man, serves better as the compliment or opposite to "*Bâtard*", the abysmal brute and outcast of civilization." (Horowitz, p.8) Nevertheless, *White Fang* is a fascinating story and, similar to *The Call of the Wild*, can also be seen as an allegory in which the hero follows a difficult journey beginning with initiation, then going through various stages of transformation and finally reaching a higher level of consciousness or a better understanding of Nature which ends in a return to Nature or the Wild in the first novel and a proud sense of love, loyalty and domestication in the second story.

### Conclusion

In *White Fang* the true "hero" turns out to be neither the wolf nor any of his uneven masters, but instead one of nature's greatest gifts to all creatures: the power to adapt. It is through such "social-adaptability" that man and animal are able to both survive as well as reach new levels of consciousness. In this story, as well as in many of the author's other works, London's often pessimistic view of nature and society's harshness toward man can actually be seen as a plea for social regeneration and redemption for many of society's less fortunate outcasts. London thought that if society could somehow touch a man's soul, as Weedon Scott had

touched White Fang, then it was never too late to truly rehabilitate any human being, no matter how evil or vicious he may be. On the other hand, he also felt that society should be held responsible whenever a wild criminal such as Jim Hall appears. London therefore saw both man and animal being constantly molded, shaped and influenced by the great power of the environment around them and this theme in nowhere presented with such energy and conviction as in this captivating tale of the North.

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