



RETURN TO INNOCENCE – A STUDY OF JACK LONDON’S THE CALL OF THE WILD

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Abstract

Jack London's Call of the Wild is a novel that revolves around Buck, a well built dog who lives a comfortable and relaxed life in California. The transformation from a well trained house dog to a wild dog again is the journey that London impresses his readers with. The novel has a psychological strain where Jung's collective conscious plays a role to show how innate qualities of a species lies hidden for many generations to express itself when the need to survive arises. Jack London draws his young readers to empathize with his animals and feel the anguish of separation and loneliness.

Adolescence is a challenge for everyone concerned. Parents teachers and teenagers themselves are in the dark about how to deal with emotional upheavals. Torn between childhood and adulthood, it is a stage of confusion and learning. London's novel portrays this struggle and expression in animals with whom the readers can readily relate to. This seminar paper intends to bring out the emotional turmoil and coming of age ideas that Jack London portrays in his novels which have a psychological bearing on his young readers.

Children have a wide open mind and great imagination which allows them to enjoy stories with animals in them. Moral stories like *Panchatantra* and *Aesop's Fables* were always around to help caregivers explain situations of relative complexity of morality and ethics to children. Young adults cannot have moved too far away from this ability to enjoy and learn from tales of animals. Right from the time the tortoise overtook the hare, animals have continued to teach and impress us in stories. Jack London takes the help of animals in his novels to entertain teenagers and adults alike. Apart from writing, Jack London was a novelist, journalist, short story writer, a proactive socialist and a dog lover himself. His real name was John Griffith Chaney and he was born in January 12, 1892. His novels include *White Fang*, *Love of Life*, *An Odyssey of the North*, *The Pearls of Parlay*, *The Heathen* and *The Sea Wolf* among others.

Buck is a German Shepherd, who is loved by his master, a judge in California, and lives a calm and relaxed life until he is stolen by the servant Manuel and sold to two French-Canadians –Perrault and Francoise, who ship him to Alaska where he is forced to work as a sled dog. The novel is situated during the peak of the 'Klodike Gold Rush' when horses could not endure the cold and were replaced by dogs to draw the sleds. The story continues to show how Buck meets Spitz and a struggle for power and proving his strength ensues. Buck also sees a change in ownership where his owners are not aware of how to deal with dogs and over feed them or starve them. Finally Buck meets John Thornton and loves his new master. He continues to struggle with the thought of returning to the wild and staying with the master that he loves. Finally when his master is killed by Yeehat natives, Buck goes back to the wild after avenging his master's death by killing the natives.

The Call of the Wild may be a novel about a dog but in many ways it causes the readers to empathise with its protagonist. By using an animal, London steers clear of complicated "character analysis" that may arise with human protagonists and he is able to concentrate on the issue at hand (London v). The novel may be considered a bildungsroman as it shows the change from a well trained house dog to a dog who answers to its innate nature and instinct. This change can be considered its coming-of-age experience. It has been considered as a good read for young adults since many youngsters can identify with the struggles that Buck faces. Having been sheltered from birth by his owner, Buck does not have a clue about the world around him. The novel begins with the words " Buck did not read the newspaper, or he would have know that trouble was brewing, not alone for himself..." (London 1). Right from the beginning parallels can be drawn from the life of Buck to our everyday youngsters who are on the threshold of adulthood but still are unaware of the struggles and ways of the world. When Buck lands in Dyea beach, he is surprised when his feet touch the ground:

... Into a white mushy something very like mud. He sprang back with a snort. More of this white stuff was falling through the air. He shook himself, but more of it fell upon him. He sniffed it curiously, then licked some up on his tongue. It bit like fire, and the next instant was gone. This puzzled him. He tried it again, with the same result. The onlookers laughed uproariously, and he felt ashamed, he knew not why, for it was his first snow. (London 13).

It brings out one of many new things that buck sees and experiences. Readers are immediately reminded of their first time in the snow. It is also an indicator that adolescence is an age where an individual see many things in life for the first time. They realize many things for themselves. It is a time when many leave the security of their home for higher studies or college and



are forced to see life from their own perspective rather than be influenced or coerced by their parents and care givers. The shift from school to college is a change for every child since they see a change in the attitude of their authorities. They are expected to make certain choices for themselves and they are no longer constantly monitored as they were in school. Rules are more relaxed and they are given more charge of themselves and expected to be more responsible. The change is sometimes sudden and leaves them baffled. In many cases, the loss of a parents during adolescence is a huge blow to their perception of the world. In it very similar to the feelings that Buck experiences when he is taken out of his home and loses his master. They deal with many “first snows” during this period.

Immediately after he is stolen, Buck is left to fend for himself and is no longer under the protection and assured love of his master.

So sudden was it, and so unexpected, that Buck was taken aback. He saw Spitz run out his scarlet tongue in a way he had of laughing; and he saw François, swinging an axe, spring into the mess of dogs. Three men with clubs were helping him to scatter them. It did not take long. Two minutes from the time Curly went down, the last of her assailants were clubbed off. But she lay there limp and lifeless in the bloody, trampled snow, almost literally torn to pieces, the swart half-breed standing over her and cursing horribly. The scene often came back to Buck to trouble him in his sleep. So that was the way. No fairplay. Once down, that was the end of you. Well, he would see to it that he never went down. Spitz ran out his tongue and laughed again, and from that moment Buck hated him with a bitter and deathless hatred. (London 16).

He learns to identify people who are aware of how to treat dogs and those who are arrogant. He can recognize the men that respect his strength. Buck learns to analyse and understand the world of humans and dogs gradually. The “man in the red sweater”, beats him up to break his spirit and confidence into subjugation and for his obedience he is rewarded with food (London 10). Buck gradually learns how to please people to get his way. He learns that some humans are not at all aware of the ways of dogs and are unsure of how to handle them. When his owners change and his new owners, a group of three people: Hal, Charles and Mercedes, take charge he learns that life is extremely transient and nothing remains the same for too long. He also realizes that his new owners don’t have a clue on handling animals and are ignorant about travelling in the snow. Similarly youngsters are very sensitive to the way they are instructed by their care givers and they instantly know it if their caregivers are not consistent or reasonable and the element of trust is lost between the caregivers and the adolescent. Flannagan says that this respect is key in adolescents to establish better relationships in adulthood.

...perceptions that their teachers listen to and respect students’ opinion... social trust is higher in adulthood for those persons who in adolescence had parents and teachers that respected them and their rights to hold autonomous opinions, even if they conflict with the adults’ opinion... establishing shared norms of respect. (Flannagan 184).

When teenagers realize that the caregivers are lacking in certain requirements but fail to acknowledge their shortcomings, it is at these junctures that the child in the person realizes that the adult is not necessarily the adult anymore and that the adolescent has more of the adult capabilities than the caregivers. S/He begins to take responsibility for their own actions.

According to the theory of Transaction Analysis, every individual has the P-A-C (Parent- Adult – Child) in their ego. P is the “Introjected Parent – the thoughts, feelings and behaviours we have taken from other”, A – “Integrated Adult – The thoughts feelings and behaviours corresponding to current reality” and C corresponds to “Archaic Child – the thoughts, feelings and behaviours we have experienced in the past” (Lapworth 36).

At any given situation of conflict the individual may react like the Child in him or the Parent or the Adult. In the situation where the care giver is not consistent or doesn’t act his/her part, the Adult in the adolescent may emerge, and is a part of the process of growing up. Young readers will be able to connect to the judgment that Buck makes of Hal. Charles and Mercedes when they take in too much luggage, or don’t conserve food for the long journey or when they urge the dogs to cross the thinning ice across the lake. In the last instance Buck refuses to budge and lies till in spite of the beating. He is left behind as the rest proceed to cross the lake when the ice gives way and they drown. The readers know that Buck was right all along.

The struggle for identity among his peers is another problem that Buck faces. When he is put into a pack in a sled pulling team, he meets the leader of the team –Spitz. Buck is a born leader with his build and personality. A power struggle begins between the two dogs to prove the leader of the pack. Instances where Spitz laughs at a dog, who is badly hurt, or stealing Bucks share of food and sleeping spots are consciously to provoke Buck and cause him to earn a bad name with his masters. But Buck manages to steal the show in a chase after a rabbit where Buck fights head on with Spitz and wins the ordeal. It is



then established that Buck is the Alpha. Similar situations are seen in the lives of teenagers where they are provoked by their peers and are constantly in the need to prove their valor or integrity.

During the time of sled pulling Buck often has strange dreams where he see himself sitting next to a primeval man. It is the idea that some strange remnants of past experiences of his species have been lying dormant in his mind. It reminds the readers of the Collective Unconscious that Carl Jung spoke of.

The Collective unconscious goes even deeper than the unconscious mind. It is a realm of experience that exists in all human beings. It connects each individual to every other person living on the planet, taking us back through our genetic history and all the way to the beginning of time itself... The real beauty of how the Collective Unconscious impacts dreaming is that... it is possible to be aware of its symbolic meaning on a deeper level. Often this requires the dreamer to do little research to discover what the dream is telling them. (Lennox 40).

The new routine of hard work and finding a place for himself in his pack brings out certain innate abilities that he didn't know he possessed. Dreams of his ancestors, the wild dogs and their natural instinct, awake in him.

This can be symbolic of the choices that teenagers make when they are left to their own devices. The understanding of the world up until then is strongly influenced and shaped by the ideas of their parents and care givers. When they are left to look at the world once more, many a times they are able to re-evaluate their understanding and be able to question previously believed dogma and ideas that have been handed over to them. In situations like these, they draw on their own innate understanding. It is a time of self discovery and being true to their personality without much influence of their parents. It is an understanding of themselves apart from what their parents taught them, but a combined understanding of many generations that has led to who they have become and who they aspire to be. Their ability to draw from the past and shape their future in their individual fashion is the challenge that each of these adolescents face during this period of time.

The novel is fast paced and well crafted with third person narration centered on the dog. Anthropomorphism is a technique that London uses to the extent that readers may forget that Buck is a dog. The novel shows the return of the domesticated animal from its unnatural habitat of servility to its natural state in the wild, its return to innocence.

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