

ANALYSIS

The Call of the Wild (1903)

Jack London

(1876-1916)

“*The Call of the Wild*, summary as well as summit of London’s achievement, is the story of a dog stolen from civilization to draw a sledge in Alaska, eventually to escape from human control and go back to the wild as leader of a pack of wolves. As in most animal tales the narrative is sentimentalized. Buck has a psychology which he derives too obviously from his human creator; learns the law of the brute wilderness too quickly and too consciously; dreams too definitely of the savage progenitors from whom he inherits, by way of atavism, his ability to contend with a new world. This sympathetic fallacy, however, has behind it a reality in London’s own experience which lends power to the drama of Buck’s restoration to the primitive. In something of this fashion the young tramp had learned the hard rules of the road; in something of this fashion the gold-seeker had mastered the difficulties of the Klondike face to face with a nature which made no allowance for his handicaps and which apparently desired the destruction of the men who had ventured into the wilderness.

Out of his experience he had built up a doctrine concerning the essential life of mankind, and out of his doctrine he had shaped this characteristic tale. But the doctrine is not excessively in evidence, and the experience contributes both an accurate lore and an authentic passion. The narrative is as spare as an expedition over the Chilkoot Pass; it is swift and strong, packed with excitement and peril. Moreover, it has what almost none of Jack London’s red blood rivals had, and what he later deprived himself of by his haste and casualness: a fine sensitiveness to landscape and environment, a robust, moving, genuine current of poetry which warms his style and heightens the effect while enriching it. It is perhaps rather his exciting stories than his explicit doctrines which made him one of the most popular proletarian writers in the world.”

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1921-68) 239-40

“The two dog stories, *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906), are more successful [than *The Sea Wolf* (1904)] because they are uncomplicated by the problem of sex in society. The love of dog and man may be studied in primitive terms more readily than may that of man and woman. In the one book a dog breaks with the codes of civilization and reverts, step by step, to its wolf origins; in the other a part-wolf is gradually weaned from the wild and takes his place in the world of his man-god. *The Call of the Wild* is London’s most satisfying work. The theme and action are in tune, the character of Buck is fully realized, the story proceeds with the economy and sure strokes of a writer in full command of his material. But never again, except in occasional short stories where the task is easier because less ambitious, did he so sharpen his focus and so completely realize his biological thesis in fictional form.... The message of social revolution is expressed better in essay and tract than in any of his fiction.”

Robert E. Spiller
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1036

“It is believed that London was influenced in writing this famous story of a dog who goes native and joins a wolf pack, by reading E. R. Young’s *My Dogs in the Northland*. The background is a cruel Alaska winter; among the human characters are Buck’s master, grief at whose death makes the dog take to the wilds, and other prospectors in the Klondike gold rush. London works out in the course of the story his ideas on the need for adaptation to survive and on the influence of heredity. The book is at once sentimental and poetic....

White Fang (1905)

Written as a sequel to *The Call of the Wild*, which describes the reversion of a tame dog to a wild state, *White Fang* tells of a wild wolf-dog who is gradually domesticated. After being brutally treated by his first owner to make him ferocious for dogfights, *White Fang* is rescued by Weedon Scott, a mining engineer, who tames the dog by his patience and kindness. Scott takes *White Fang* from the Yukon to his home in California, where the dog dies while defending his master's family against an escaped convict."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

Michael Hollister (2015)