

## The Voice of the Wilderness: Exploring Eco-Consciousness in Jack London's Novel

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### Abstract:

This article explores eco-consciousness in Jack London's novels. His novels are remarkable not only for their adventurous narratives but also for their profound engagement with ecological consciousness. This article investigates how London's portrayal of nature and animal characters reflects a complex eco-centric philosophy ahead of its time. London's emphasis on the transformative power of environmental context moves the narrative beyond simple survival stories. They explore the psychology of resilience, how creatures, human and animal alike, adapt to environmental pressures in a way that calls into question the boundaries of species and the supremacy of humanity. London's work critiques the destructive aspects of civilisation. Through the sufferings and evolving consciousness of Buck and White Fang, the novels expose the violence and alienation wrought by human exploitation of nature. The novels suggest that dignity and meaning are achieved not through dominance, but through respectful engagement with the wild, a philosophy that aligns with eco-conscious values. By synthesizing close textual analysis with eco-critical perspectives, this article argues that *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* articulate a radical ecological vision that invites us to listen to the wilderness. London's writing urges contemporary spectators to reconsider the human relationship with nature, question the assumption of superiority, and embrace the ethics of ecological humility. By foregrounding the wilderness as a source of wisdom and transformation, Jack London's novels anticipate current conversations about environmental stewardship, interdependence, and the moral necessity of eco-consciousness in literature and life.

**Keywords:** Eco-consciousness, Stewardship, Ecological humanity, Resilience, Interdependence.

## Introduction

Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *The White Fang* (1906) remains two of the most enduring contributions to American Literature, not merely because of their gripping narratives and vivid Yukon landscapes but due to their gripping narratives and vivid Yukon landscapes but due to their profound engagement with ecological consciousness. These works capture more than animal adventures; they articulate an early 20th-century environmental ethic that continues to resonate in the era of the Anthropocene. In both novels, the wilderness functions as a sovereign force, a voice shaping identities, testing, survival, and compelling adaptation. This voice of the wilderness operates beyond romantic idealisations London portrays it as an autonomous, morally neutral, yet ethically instructive presence.

The orbit of Buck in *The Call of the Wild* from domestic security to feral mastery mirrors a process of rewilding that invites readers to reconsider the human separation from nature. In reverse, *White Fang's* journey from untamed wolf-dog to cooperative coexistence with humans questions the binary opposition between wildness and civilisation, exploring an ethics grounded in respect, mutual adaptation and interdependence.

The era in which London was written one of rapid industrial growth, aggressive expansion into natural frontiers, and an increasing commodification of nature. Americans actively promoted westward expansionist ideology and widely celebrated the exploitation of natural resources as a sign of national progress. However London's works resist this anthropocentric narrative. Instead of depicting the wilderness as a mere arena for human conquest, he imbues it with a complex, commanding, and often indifferent voice, reminding readers that nature has its own laws that transcend human desires. His vivid engagement with Arctic and sub-Arctic landscapes, drawn from his own experiences in the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897 - 1898, grounds his novels in a tactile realism that refuses sentimentality while not

denying beauty. In doing so, London positions the wilderness as a co-protagonist, one whose power and integrity demand both respect and ethical reflection.

In *The Call of the Wild*, Jack London chronicles the profound change that Buck, a tame dog, undergoes when he is brutally torn from his life of luxury on a California estate and thrust into the harsh, unrelenting world of sled dogs in the Yukon. This sudden transition not only subjects Buck to physical challenges and competition but also marks the beginning of a psychological and primal awakening. With the comforts and security of his former life stripped away, he is forced to relearn how to live, leaving behind the trappings of domestication as he rediscovers his primal roots. His journey is one of regression and awakening, as he sheds the comforts of domestication and rediscovers an ancient kinship with the wild. This transformation is not presented merely as a test of endurance but as an existential recalibration, an embrace of instinct, adaptability, and ecological belonging. Conversely, *White Fang* traces the opposite trajectory, following a wolf-dog born in the wild who is gradually drawn into domestic life, negotiating the cruelty and benevolence of the human world. Both narratives invert and mirror each other, yet they share a thematic core, depicting life as an adaptation to environmental pressures. In both cases, London collapses the boundary between human and animal, suggesting a shared vulnerability to ecological forces and an interdependence that undermines the myth of human supremacy.

Eco-consciousness in these works emerges from London's refusal to reduce animals to mere symbols or embodiments of human moral lessons. His protagonists possess agency and a sensory awareness that shape their interactions with their surroundings. The Yukon landscapes are not sterile settings but active agents shaping behaviour, dictating survival strategies, and reinforcing the primal laws that govern life. In *The Call of the Wild*, the "law of club and fang" sets up a harsh but irrepressible natural order in which power, instinct, and adaptability are the keys to survival. Likewise, in *The White Fang*, the periodic patterns of scarcity and plenty

demonstrate a world in which the forces of nature are in constant flux, and in which life itself is a matter of making intelligent adjustments to the natural cycles of the environment. Taken together, these themes convey the idea of life as a balance and make clear that living things exist not by asserting dominance, but by recognizing and respecting the order that governs all of them. This ecological ethic, rooted in adaptation, mutual dependence, and respect for the integrity of the natural world, anticipates values that contemporary environmental movements continue to champion..

It is also essential to consider London's personal worldview in interpreting these eco-conscious themes. Influenced by Darwinian evolution, Nietzschean philosophy, and the socialist critique of industrial capitalism, London fused biological determinism with a critique of human exploitation of nature. However, unlike some naturalists of his time, his fiction does not portray nature simply as a brutal, mechanical force. Instead, he acknowledges its capacity for renewal, harmony, and even spiritual transformation for those who attune themselves to its rhythms. In this sense, the wilderness is not solely adversarial; it is also a repository of wisdom and a corrective to the excesses of civilisation. The voice of the wilderness in London's writing calls for humility, patience, and attentiveness qualities, that clash with the extractive logic driving industrial society in his era.

This article will explore how these narratives employ animal perspective, evolutionary theory; and wilderness as characters to critique anthropocentrism and envision models of multispecies coexistence. Through an eco-critical framework (Garrard 5; Haraway 20) and situated within London's historical, philosophical, and literary contexts, the discussion will demonstrate how these works anticipate current debates in environmental ethics, deep ecology, and resilience theory.

## Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Environmental Discourse

London was writing during a transitional phase in American environmental thought. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Manifest Destiny movement led to the destruction of the American landscape through deforestation, overhunting, and industrialization (Nash 145). In the early 1900s, preservationists like John Muir were promoting a policy based on reverence for the spiritual and aesthetic value of nature (Muir 59), while political leaders like President Theodore Roosevelt were advancing conservation through the creation of protected lands and national forests (Roosevelt 188). Nevertheless, exploitation and preservation coexisted uneasily (Worster 94).

However, most Americans in London's era still regarded the wilderness as a resource to be exploited or conquered. London's novels stand at an interesting intersection; they do not constitute pure preservationist propaganda, nor do they glorify unrestrained exploitation. Instead, they present the wilderness as a morally complex space with its own set of laws, which humans ignore at their peril. By depicting dogs and wolves as intelligent, sentient actors that survival depends on understanding these laws, London aligns himself consciously or not with emerging proto-ecological thinking.

This period's environmental discourse, therefore, serves as a backdrop to London's writings, positioning his work as both a product and a critique of the cultural tensions surrounding wilderness, nature's value, and human responsibility. His narratives invite readers to reconsider the human position within ecological webs not as masters, but as participants subject to nature's rhythms and contingencies.

London's rendering of the Yukon reflects both strands of thought. While his wilderness is harsh and unsentimental, it is also inherently worthy of respect, governed by its own laws. Without employing the terminology of biodiversity or ecosystem, his fiction implies a proto-ecological awareness survival occurs only through balance with the environment (Garrard 5).

### **London in the American Literary Tradition**

London occupies a distinctive place in American nature writing. While contemporaries like Muir wrote primarily of the beauty and sanctity of wilderness, London embedded such sensibilities in fiction grounded in hardship, predation, and survival. His Yukon tales combine the naturalist novel's deterministic forces, as seen in writers like Stephen Crane, with an emotive connection to animal life that anticipates later works in animal-centred literature.

While early American frontier literature typically centred human perspectives and valorised human conquest of nature, London's novels challenge this by granting animals complex interiority and agency. Buck in *The Call of the Wild* and White Fang in the eponymous novel are not mere symbols or tools for human concerns; they are subjects with motivations, emotions, and survival ethics rooted in the wilderness. This narrative choice destabilises the absolutism of human exceptionalism and gestures towards a more inclusive ecology of life.

This literary positioning also anticipates eco-critical and posthumanist readings that interrogate human-animal boundaries and promote recognition of the intrinsic dignity of non-human beings. London's work acts as a bridge connecting the rugged wilderness adventure tale with modern environmental literature where themes of interdependence, vulnerability, and ecological balance are paramount.

### **Bridging Past and Present Environmental Concerns**

London's eco-consciousness prefigures present-day concerns about climate instability and habitat degradation. His depictions of cyclical abundance and scarcity in the wilderness mirror resilience theory's emphasis on adaptation in dynamic systems (Holling 17). The critique of industrial exploitation in his novels anticipates modern environmental justice perspectives (Merchant 45), making his work strikingly relevant in Anthropocene debates (Crutzen and Stoermer 17).

Moreover, London's approach is particularly relevant to debates in today's Anthropocene era. His depiction of animal protagonists adapting to climate, scarcity, and inter-species dynamics echoes modern scientific understanding of ecological resilience. London's skepticism about human arrogance in the face of nature foreshadows contemporary debates about sustainability and the boundaries of environmental exploitation.

Basically, London's work helps articulate an early environmental ethos, not one focused on static preservation but on recognizing the vitality and interconnectedness of the natural world. His legacy invites us to listen anew to the voice of the wilderness, fostering a deeper eco-consciousness that remains urgently relevant.

This historical and literary context provides the critical foundation for exploring how *The Call of the Wild* and *The White Fang* engage eco-conscious themes by giving nature a compelling voice and redefining human-animal relations within an ecological framework. The subsequent sections will delve into detailed textual analyses, starting with *The Call of the Wild* and its portrayal of rewilding, survival laws, and an ecological belonging.

### **Eco-consciousness in *The Call of the Wild***

Buck's adventure starts in the comfortable surroundings of Judge Miller's Santa Clara Valley home, but it is turned upside down when he is stolen and sold into the tough life of a Yukon sled dog (London 3). Initially bewildered by the violence of the dog hierarchy and the merciless cold, Buck adapts, seeing and hearing things of which he had no conscious knowledge (London 35). This awakening of instinct signals a stripping away of domestication and a reconnection with evolutionary memory, a rewilding process.

From an eco-critical perspective, Buck's transformation represents not regression but alignment with the natural order's demands (Garrard 55). London resists framing the

wilderness as chaos instead; it is a realm of tightly woven survival networks into which Buck integrates himself.

### **The Voice of Instinct and Ecological Belonging**

Buck hears The Call in dreams of prehistoric hunts and in the cry of wolves across the snow (London 132). This voice is not literal but an existential summoning to belong thoroughly to the ecological web. The culmination of Buck's journey, assuming leadership of a wild pack after Thornton's death, marks his full integration into the natural world, reinforcing London's vision that true fulfillment arises from respecting and harmonizing with nature's rhythms.

### **Eco-consciousness in *The White Fang***

Inverting Buck's arc, *The Call of the Wild* follows a wolf-dog born in the wild and gradually integrated into human companionship. Early life in the Yukon wilds teaches White Fang to never give in to weakness (London 67). His initial encounters with humans result in exploitation and cruelty, reinforcing hostility (London 89). Only under Weedon Scott's care does he experience trust, reframing domestication as mutual adaptation rather than conquest. From an eco-critical stance, this is not civilisation taming nature but a negotiated coexistence grounded in recognition of each other's autonomy (Haraway 25).

### **Cycles of Scarcity and Abundance**

The novel meticulously depicts predator-prey dynamics, seasonal changes, and food scarcity. White Fang's life in the wild is shaped by ecological cycles when meat had been plenty he thrives in lean times, all the animals were hungry, and the fear of death pressed heavily (London 49). These patterns mirror ecological models of carrying capacity and resource fluctuation (Holling 19).

### **Mutual Recognition**

White Fang's ultimate loyalty to Scott, culminating in saving him from an assaulter, embodies a form of interspecies ethics. Trust emerges through long term respectful interaction, suggesting that coexistence depends on empathy, inhibition and reciprocity values increasingly emphasized in human - wildlife relations today (Merchant 128).

### **The Wilderness as Character and Moral Authority**

In both novels, the Yukon is as much a character as Buck or White Fang. Its agency is evident in blizzards that halt journeys, in rivers that break under sledges and in moments of abundance that allow rest (London 77). Its Moral authority lies not in dispensing justice but in structuring the terms of survival, adapt or die.

Ecologically, London's wilderness operates as an all-encompassing system in which humans are participants, not overseers. Its neutrality fosters self-awareness and ecological humility (Garrard 62).

### **Critiques of Civilisation and Anthropocentrism**

London's portrayal of human society often contrasts unfavourably with the honest violence of the wilderness. In *The call of the wild*, cruelty comes in the form of Hal, Charles, and Mercedes' incompetence and greed, leading to the dogs' sufferings (London 101). In *White fang*, Beauty smith's abuse epitomizes human exploitation (London 140).

By connecting these with the necessity driven harshness of the wild, London critiques civilisation's moral failings and its delusion of separateness from ecological laws (Merchant 44).

### **Jack London and Contemporary Eco-critical Theory**

London's work resonates with deep ecology's biocentric equality, valuing all life intrinsically (Garrard 45). His animals are not backdrops but agents whose survival stories compel respect. By narrating through Buck's and White Fang's consciousness, London anticipates Haraway's advocacy for multispecies narratives that recognizes the agency and subjectivity of non-human beings (Haraway 19).

### **Anthropocene Resonances and Climate Consciousness**

Although Jack London wrote decades before the term Anthropocene was coined, his fiction anticipates core concerns of Anthropocene discourse, such as the entanglement of human agency with large-scale environmental change (Crutzen and Stoermer 17). His naturalist attention to industrial expansion, resource extraction and the fragility of ecosystems foreshadows later critical accounts of how modernity transforms climatic and habitat on planetary scales (Garrard 87 - 90). In *the Call of the Wild and the White Fang* climatic extremity, resource scarcity and ecological thresholds function as central narrative forces suggesting an early literary awareness of environmental limits that contemporary critics read through the lens of climate crisis and resilience (Holling 17 - 19).

London's dog novels also expose the uneven distribution of environmental risk and benefit, a theme that resonates with current discussion of environmental justice within Anthropocene studies (Merchant 44 - 46). Prospectors, capitalists, Indigenous peoples, animals and landscapes all experience the impacts of frontier exploitation differently, revealing hierarchies of vulnerability that complicate any universal notion of the human in the Anthropocene (Nash 145), by vividly illustrating how both canine and human bodies endure the physical and psychological tolls of capitalist expansion. London's work aligns with recent critiques of Anthropocene universalism that emphasise race, class and species difference in environmental histories (Crutzen and Stoermer 20).

### **Animal Subjectivity, Interspecies Ethics and Companion Species**

A further dimension of eco-consciousness in London's novels emerges through their sustained exploration of animal subjectivity and interspecies ethics (Garrard 150 - 55). By focalizing the narrative through Buck and White Fang, London refuses to treat animals as mere allegorical stand-ins for human concerns and instead presents them as thinking, feeling subjects with their own perspectives on pain, loyalty and freedom (London 35; London 67). This narrative strategy anticipates later animal studies and post humanist theories that call for decentring the human and recognizing animals as participants in shared moral and ecological communities (Haraway 15- 20).

Read alongside Donna Haraway's concepts of companion species, Buck's and White Fang's relationship with their human counterparts illustrate how cross-species bonds are co-constitutive shaping both human and animal identities (Haraway 3 - 5). Weedon Scott's stewardship of White Fang for instance, models an ethic of care grounded in reciprocity rather than domination suggesting that humans and animals co-evolve through practice of trust, attention and responsibility (London 140 - 45). In this light, London's dog novels can be seen as early literary experiments in imagining multispecies communities where ethical obligation extends beyond the human and where ecological flourishing depends on sustaining respectful, interdependent relationships across species boundaries (Haraway 71 – 75; Merchant 128).

### **Conclusion**

Through *The Call of the Wild* and *The White Fang*, London encourages us to hear the voice of the wilderness as an articulation of ecological law, adaptation, and interdependence that challenges human arrogance. His wilderness is indifferent yet instructive, demanding respect and humility. While rooted in early 20<sup>th</sup> century thought, these novels remain vital eco-

critical texts, offering insights into the ethics of coexistence and the necessity of aligning human endeavour with the enduring laws of the natural world.

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