

TED ANKARA COLLEGE FOUNDATION PRIVATE HIGH SCHOOL

ENGLISH B

EXTENDED ESSAY

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Word Count: 3601

Research Question: What is the role of themes and author's figurative language in representing the process of change of the main characters in 'White Fang' and 'The Call of the Wild'?

Abstract:

In Jack London's two well-known novels, 'White Fang' and 'The Call of the Wild', dogs that are trying to adapt themselves to new environmental conditions by using their hereditary qualities, are the main characters. Jack London creates two reverse processes of change. In 'White Fang', the wild wolf dog White Fang becomes civilised and tame in order to survive in his new life with humans. On the other hand in 'The Call of the Wild' tame half-breed Buck discovers his atavistic instincts and becomes a wild dog in order to survive in harsh conditions of nature. So, this essay investigates the following research question:

'What is the role of themes and author's figurative language in representing the process of change of the main characters in 'White Fang' and 'The Call of the Wild'?

The scope of my investigation is to make an analysis of these two opposite processes and show how Jack London supports them with themes and figurative language. Heredity is one of the major themes in both of the novels. White Fang and Buck manage to survive despite the new hard conditions because they carry the necessary qualities. The other major theme is survival of the fittest. White Fang and Buck survive because of their abilities to adapt themselves to new conditions and quick-learning.

The figurative language is also very significant in representation of these two opposite processes. Nature imageries, personifications and Jack London's diction support these processes of change.

However, although White Fang and Buck's processes are opposite to each other, Jack London doesn't give any priorities to them. By creating two very similar plots, he actually shows that two processes are equally difficult. He tries to point out that heredity and adapting ability play the key roles in survival.

Word Count: 293

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1.Introduction:

Jack London is one of the most well-known and productive authors of American Literature. His novels have been read by masses and his success has been accepted by the critics and the other authors.

Being a representative of Naturalism, nature plays the leading part and struggling in order to survive in nature's harsh conditions forms the major theme in most of Jack London's novels. *'His characters' lives are governed by forces of heredity and environment'*¹ and this is another aspect of naturalism. In 'White Fang' and 'The Call of the Wild' Jack London chooses White Fang and Buck, two hybrid dogs, as his main characters. He makes them to set into a journey in fierce conditions nature and their environment plays an important role in their changing processes during this journey.

'White Fang' tells the story of a half-breed whose mother is a half-dog, half-wolf and whose father is a real wolf. His father, One Eye, dies in a fight and his sisters and brothers are beaten by the severe conditions of nature. So, White Fang and his mother She-Wolf try to survive in nature's severe conditions on their own. One day, White Fang gets trapped by an Indian tribe and there he learns that his mother has been living with humans before and her real name is Kiche. They start to live with the tribe and White Fang acquires lots of new experiences about civilised life. He meets a new feeling, hostility, and learns that his own kind can be the greatest enemy. White Fang's life changes drastically once again when he is traded for whisky by his master. His new owner, Beauty Smith makes White Fang fight with other dogs and White Fang is almost killed by a bulldog before a man called Weeden Scott saves him. Scott takes him his home and White Fang start to live with his family.

'The Call of the Wild' and 'White Fang' are like the two halves of a circle as 'The Call Of The Wild' starts from the point where 'White Fang' ends. Buck, a St. Bernard-Scotch Shepherd hybrid, lives happily in Judge Miller's house until he's been traded by the gardener. Buck is shipped to Klondike and meets an unknown world which is ruled with violence and cruelty. Then he is sold to Francois and Perrault and he becomes a sled dog. He learns how to survive in nature and among other dogs. Eventually, he becomes the leader of the sled when he kills his fierce enemy, Spitz. Buck's owners change but his duty remains the same. He continues his life as a sled dog and he endures a lot of pain because of his cruel masters until

¹ www.luc.edu/faculty/cscheil/teach/rrn3.html

he meets John Thornton. Thornton becomes his new master and he shows his love and loyalty to him various times including saving John from drowning. However, Buck can't resist his instincts and makes short trips to the wild. Then one day, he returns to see that John Thornton is killed by Yeehats and he takes his vengeance by attacking and killing them. Then, he follows his instincts and returns to wild.

As it can be seen from the brief summaries' above, both White Fang and Buck undergo a process of change and Jack London demonstrates this process with the help of different elements like themes and style. Therefore my research question is:

What is the role of themes and author's figurative language in representing the process of change of the main characters in 'White Fang' and 'The Call of the Wild'?

In the first section of the body part, I will explain what the word 'change' stands for in both novels as it refers to two opposite concepts. In the second section I will investigate the major themes and how they contribute to the 'changing process'. In the final section, I will examine the figurative language and how it supports the changes of the two main characters, White Fang and Buck.

1. Retrogression vs. Progression :

Jack London is one of the major naturalist novelists in the American Literature. In his novels his main characters usually have to struggle in order to survive in the severe conditions of nature. In his novels ‘The Call of the Wild’ and ‘White Fang’, again instinctual struggle for survival is the leading part and the fittest one survives. However, Jack London creates a conflict in these novels. In ‘White Fang’ the main character, White Fang, undergoes a progression and becomes civilized. However in the ‘The Call of the Wild’ the process works in reverse and the civilized ‘Buck’ fully repossesses his atavistic primitive instincts as he encounters the challenges of nature.

Buck’s journey to primordial initially starts when Manuel, one of the gardener’s helpers in Judge Miller’s house, sells Buck to a stranger. His new owners take him and Buck is introduced to a new kind of master ship which is based on fear and hatred rather than loyalty and respect. He also understands that a new law is valid for his new life: *‘the law of the club and fang’*². He summarises the rapid changes in his life as *‘had been suddenly jerked from the heart of civilization and flung into the heart of things primordial.’*³ Everything is strange for him and he even meets the snow there for the first time in his life. However, Buck’s greatest advantage is his capacity of learning and adjusting himself to new conditions. This ability supports He learns how to sleep without feeling cold and how to steal without being caught. He learns that the one who holds the club is the winner and obeying is the only choice.

*‘Not that Buck reasoned it out. He was fit, that was all, and unconsciously he accommodated himself to the new mode of life...Civilized, he could have died for a moral consideration, say the defence of Judge Miller’s riding whip; but the completeness of his decivilization was now evidenced by his ability to flee from the defence of a moral consideration and so save his hide.’*⁴

Buck’s learning process isn’t just with experience. He starts to feel the dominance of his primordial instincts. He faintly remembers how his ancestors hunt as packs and how they eat

² London, Jack. The Call Of The Wild. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011. p. 14

³ London, Jack. The Call Of The Wild. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011. p. 14

⁴ London, Jack. The Call Of The Wild. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011. p. 22

their meat. He shows how overpowering his heredity is by howling like a wolf in the cold nights.

One of the characteristics of naturalism is Darwinist attitude, in other words survival of the fittest. This element is represented through Buck and Spitz's fight. In the beginning, Buck realizes the law of the fang and accepts Spitz's power. He waits patiently until he becomes fitter than Spitz and during their fight, he doesn't even consider leaving Spitz alive as only the fittest should survive. After the fight Buck becomes the leader of the sled his instincts help him to be a perfect leader.

Buck's life drastically changes again when he meets John Thornton and he meets a feeling for the first time in his life: '*love, genuine passionate love*'⁵; in Buck's words. His affection strains Buck's primordial instincts for a while. Buck recalls his moral values like not stealing from a master he respects and loves. However, his wild instincts have overpowered his intellect long ago so even his love for John can't prevent him from listening to the call of the wild and he leaves John. Because Buck doesn't have his free will anymore and he has to obey his hereditary primordial instincts.

Unlike Buck's 'retrogression' process 'White Fang' is about a wolf-dog which suppresses his hereditary instincts and becomes civilized. White Fang is born into a world that nature is the greatest rival and he learns that he has to fit himself into every situation like hunger or fight in order to survive. White Fang's first encounter to the civilized world is the fire-makers, human beings. He calls them as 'Gods' and accepts their superiority. He also learns that his mother used to be with them and her name was Kiche. As they start to live with the tribe, the vitality of quick-learning and accommodation to new conditions show itself. Like Buck, White Fang learns that he has to steal in order to survive, the one with the club is stronger and the law of kill or be killed. However, White Fang cannot overcome his wild instincts although he learns the rules quickly. He causes a lot of trouble and fight so eventually every dog and fire-makers start to hate him. '*Hated by his kind and by mankind, indomitable, perpetually warred upon and himself waging perpetual war, his development was rapid and one-sided. The code he learned was to obey the strong and to oppress the weak. His development was in the*

⁵ London, Jack. The Call Of The Wild. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011. p. 69

*direction of power.*⁶ So White Fang runs away and returns to wild. However, once he has learned about civilization, it becomes impossible for him to return his old life.

White Fang's greatest struggle for survival occurs when a dog fighter, Beauty Smith takes him. White Fang endures a lot of pain because of him and he loses all his respect and confidence to humans. White Fang's primordial instincts take the control of him and he cannot think anything but to survive. So when his 'John Thornton' Weedon Scott saves him, White Fang has already turned into a beast.

However, Weedon Scott's patience and compassion helps White Fang to get rid of all his hatred and doubts. When Scott takes him his home, White Fang proves his devotion by putting his life in risk in order to protect Weedon and his family. The name of the one of the final chapters shows what White Fang will follow for the rest of his life: The Call of the Kind.

In both of his novels, Jack London uses dogs as main characters and shows that nature and environment's harsh conditions can be a determinant in their changes. He uses reverse progresses to show this. Buck listens to the call of the wild and becomes dicivilized whereas White Fang becomes tame and civilized. However, Jack London doesn't give any priority or more importance to either. Two processes are equally challenging: a wolf-dog becoming civilized and a tame, St. Bernard-Scotch Shepherd hybrid, becoming wild. So, the question is what is the point of creating two opposite processes and how does Jack London demonstrate them? The answer of this question will be investigated in the next section.

⁶ London, Jack. White Fang. İstanbul: White Face Publishing, 2010. p. 100

2. Themes:

White Fang and Buck's changing processes are supported with the themes which are showing the naturalistic point of view of Jack Landon. I will investigate two major themes that are mainly dominating both of the novels: heredity and survival of the fittest.

Heredity:

*'Naturalistic writers were influenced by the evolution theory of Charles Darwin. They believed that one's heredity and social environment determine one's character and influence the actions of its subjects.'*⁷ Thus, heredity plays an important role in both 'White Fang' and 'The Call of the Wild'.

White Fang's atavistic instincts arise initially when he sees the mankind for the first time. *'Not alone out of his own eyes, but out of the eyes of all his ancestors was the cub now looking upon man –out of eyes that had circled in the darkness around countless winter camp-fires, that had peered from safe distances and from the hearts of thickets at the strange ,two-legged animal that was lord over living things. The spell of the cub's heritage was upon him, the fear and the respect born of the centuries of struggle and the accumulated experience of the generations.'*⁸

As White Fang's mother has once lived with humans, being tame and civilised is actually in the blood of him. So, although he has never seen humans before, he knows that they are superior to the other creatures from his atavistic instincts. This is also the reason why White Fang starts a new life with Weedon Scott and his family without having too much adaptation problems.

The similar situation is also applicable for Buck. Although his experiences guide him, his inherited characteristics provide his ability to adapt himself to the challenging conditions of nature. *'And not only did he learn by experience, but instincts long dead became alive again. The domesticated generations fell from him. In vague ways he remembered back to the youth of the breed, to the time the wild dogs ranged in packs through the primeval forest and killed*

⁷Zhang, Xiaofen. Journal of Language Teaching and Research, Vol. 1, No. 3. Finland: 2010 ACADEMY PUBLISHER, May 2010.p.280

⁸ London, Jack. White Fang. İstanbul: White Face Publishing, 2010. p. 80

*their meat as they ran it down...They came to him without effort or discovery, as though they had been his always.*⁹

The question in the previous section finds an answer here. Jack London creates two reverse processes in these two novels and both White Fang and Buck have to deal with the difficulties caused by nature and their environment. Therefore, it can be said that heredity is the key point in their struggle. Although White Fang has the qualities of a wolf, as his mother has lived with humans in her early life, he can adapt himself to the world of humans and becomes tamed. Also having wild ancestors helps Buck hear the call of the wild and follow his primordial instincts. With a more general statement, Jack London's both novels show that all living creatures can adapt themselves into new conditions but their progresses may differ due to their hereditary qualities.

Survival of the fittest:

*'Darwin's Theory of Evolution is a basis for the Naturalist writer. Natural selection and survival of the fittest help to depict the struggle against nature as a hopeless fight'*¹⁰ Both in 'White Fang' and 'The Call of the Wild' struggling against nature's severe conditions and the survival of the fittest one are other major themes. White Fang's progression and Buck's retrogression processes are supported with this theme.

White Fang's witnesses that only the fittest one survives when he is just a cub. He sees all of his sisters and brothers are beaten by the nature. Just White Fang survives because he is the fittest one. *'He was a fierce little cub. So were his brothers and sisters... But he was further the fiercest of the litter. He could make a louder rasping growl than any of them... It was he that first learned the trick of rolling a fellow-cub over with a cunning paw-stroke.'*¹¹ Later on, while he is living with the Indian tribe, he learns very quickly and adapts himself to the new conditions. He understands that one, strict law is valid: *'to oppress the weak and obey the strong.'*¹² So, White Fang learns the rules of survival in the civilised world of human beings and this quickens his progression.

⁹ London, Jack. The Call Of The Wild. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011.p.23

¹⁰ <http://www.luc.edu/faculty/cschei1/teach/rrn3.html>

¹¹ London, Jack. White Fang. İstanbul: White Face Publishing, 2010. p. 57

¹² London, Jack. White Fang. İstanbul: White Face Publishing, 2010. p. 112

Buck's talent of rapid-learning also makes him be able to adjust himself to the difficulties of nature. He knows he has to be the fittest in order to survive in the *'hostile Northland environment'*¹³ and he develops both physically and mentally. *'His development (or retrogression) was rapid. His muscles became hard as iron, and he grew callous to all ordinary pain. He archived an internal as well as external economy.'*¹⁴ He learns that he has to obey 'the law of club and fang' to survive. Humans are the ultimate masters and he has to accept the superiority of the club. Like White Fang, Buck also understands he has to rule or he will be ruled and pity is not a feeling he can have. *'Buck was merciless... He must master or be mastered; while mercy was a weakness.'*¹⁵ Importance of being the fittest is also mentioned through Buck's fellow, Curly. *'In contrast to Buck, the good-natured Newfoundland, Curly, fails to survive because she acts civilly in a savage environment.'*¹⁶ Curly cannot adapt herself to the new conditions therefore she doesn't manage to survive. Buck's retrogression becomes faster as he quickly accommodates himself to the rules of primitive world.

¹³ London, Jack. The Call Of The Wild. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011.p.22

¹⁴ London, Jack. The Call Of The Wild. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011.p.23

¹⁵ London, Jack. The Call Of The Wild. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011.p.71-72

¹⁶ <http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides4/TheCall.html>

3. Figurative Language:

Figurative language plays a vital role in supporting Buck's retrogression and White Fang's progression processes. Being a naturalist author, Jack London uses nature and animal imageries, personifications very frequently in order to support main themes of the both novels. In addition to them, London's diction is very distinctive in the description of these reverse processes.

To start with, descriptions of nature differ due to the opposite courses of White Fang and Buck. The severe conditions of nature and harshness of wild is one of the major ideas of the both novels. However, main characters approach to the wild differs. In 'White Fang', wild stands as the greatest enemy which has to be beaten down in order to survive. From the first page of the novel, Jack London never budges from his strict attitude while he is describing nature and the serious tone is always conserved. He fortifies his point by using personifications. *'It was the masterful and incommunicable wisdom of eternity laughing at the futility of life and effort of life. It was the Wild, the savage, frozen-hearted Northland Wild.'*¹⁷ As it can be seen from the quote, London puts an image of merciless and infallible human to the nature and shows how powerless the other creatures are against its grandeur. He never presents nature as a friendly or welcoming from the eyes' of White Fang. This approach to the wild corresponds with White Fang's civilisation process. Although, he was born into that wild, it stays as White Fang's greatest terror. *'Fear!- that legacy of the Wild which no animal may escape nor exchange for pottage.'*¹⁸ Because of the harshness and coldness of the wild, it becomes easier for White Fang to leave his life in the wild and become tame and civilised. So, London's personifications support White Fang's progression process. What's more, another important can be seen from the quotes above: Wild is always written with a capital W although it's not in beginning of the sentence. This also symbolises White Fang's thoughts about formidable and horrifying 'Wild'.

On the other hand, in 'The Call of the Wild' as the situation is vice versa, Jack London also uses a reverse style. This time nature is presented as hospitable and generous and this attitude can be seen from London's figurative language. *'Buck's restlessness came back on him and*

¹⁷ London, Jack. White Fang. İstanbul: White Face Publishing, 2010. p.7

¹⁸ London, Jack. White Fang. İstanbul: White Face Publishing, 2010. p.61

*he was haunted by recollections of the wild brother, and of the smiling land beyond the divide and the run side by side through the wide forest stretches.*¹⁹ ‘Smiling land’ personification helps to create a very positive tone and this overlaps with Buck’s final decision of obeying the call of the wild.

Jack London’s diction is also very significant in the explanation of these two opposite journeys. In both of the novels human-beings are represented as the greatest of all living creatures. In ‘White Fang’ White Fang sees the humans as ‘Gods’ and he always uses this word to call them. He accepts the ascendancy of ‘Gods’ no matter how angry or cruel they are. He calls Beauty Smith as ‘*The Mad God*.’²⁰

However, in ‘The Call of the Wild’ London doesn’t use this word and Buck calls the human-beings as ‘men’. This difference in word choice explains the two opposite ways Buck and White Fang follow. Human-beings are almighty for the White Fang so in the end, his respect towards mankind outweighs his primitive instincts and he becomes tame. In ‘The Call of the Wild’ Buck also knows that mankind is superior and this knowledge is actually a part of being the fittest in both of the novels. However, Buck doesn’t see human-being as infallible as White Fang sees, which can be seen from the diction. So, in the end Buck follows the call of the wild and leaves John Thornton.

¹⁹ London, Jack. The Call Of The Wild. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011.p.91

²⁰ London, Jack. White Fang. İstanbul: White Face Publishing, 2010. p.137

4. Conclusion:

My research question was ‘What is the role of themes and author’s figurative language in representing the process of change of the main characters in ‘White Fang’ and ‘The Call of the Wild’?’ First of all, I extended the word ‘change’ which actually corresponds to two reverse processes: progression and retrogression. Then, I explained the role of themes in representing these two opposite processes and how Jack London supports them by using figurative language.

Jack London prefers to create two antithetical courses in order to show that heredity is the key point in one’s struggle for survival. He doesn’t yield precedence to any of them because he forms a very similar plot and actually makes them go through the same experience. His anthromorphic dogs show that only the fittest one that can adapt himself to the new conditions will survive and hereditary qualities will be the determinant. By having a used-to-be tame mother, White Fang is able to become civilised. Buck’s instinctual wilderness that comes along with his inheritance helps him to survive in the wild. The figurative language of the novels also reflects the difference of these changes. Jack London uses lots of nature imageries and supports them with personifications. These elements are used in order to support the main themes of the novel and process of change of the Buck and White Fang.

During my investigation, the greatest obstacle was the lack of academic researches about Jack London’s novels. So I mainly used primary sources except some other secondary sources. While I was making my research, I’ve read that Jack London’s novels are thought to be popular rather than literary and this is reason lack of sources about him. However, I think that being one of the major naturalists of American Literature, Jack London successfully reflects the characteristics of Naturalism in his novels and he deserves more and more studies about his writings. So, I wish my extended essay to be an adequate and qualified work about his two most well-known novels.

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