

# Psychoanalysis of Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*

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## Abstract

*The Call of the wild* and *White Fang* both are masterpieces of Jack London. The protagonists Buck and White Fang are the incarnation of Jack himself to some extent for the two novels reveal a great deal of the writer. This essay aims at psychoanalyzing Jack London's creative process, the Oedipus complex and the conflation between his dreams what he had been aspiring for and his real life.

**Keywords:** Oedipus complex, daydream, incarnation, conflation

## 1. Introduction

Jack London was one of the most popular writers of his times who earned his reputation by his great number of works about dogs. *The Call of the wild* published in 1903 and *White Fang* published in 1905 are the representatives of them. The United States ever witnessed one of the most significant events in the year of 1896 in the history—the Second Great Golden Rush. Inspired by the discovery of the “yellow metal”, thousands of people left homes and sailed out their adventurous journey.

It was the age of 21, Jack London threw himself into the gold rush. At that time, he spent less than one year in Northland. Although, his failed to search gold, he brought numerous adventure experience, stories and tales back to home. In his stories, there are a large quantity of dog fictions, dogs plays important role in London's famous books. He always endow dogs special sole as protagonist, including *The Call of the wild* and *White Fang*.

A majority of critics have agreed that it was the dogs that reached their fullness worldwide reputation of Jack London. In the view of their great fame, there are widely discussion from different perspectives. The hottest and the most controversial one is whether these dogs are humanized. Some critics agree while some others say “no”. It is the problem that I pay my attention to. As for myself, I prefer the opinion that these dogs are beyond what they are looks like. Buck in *The Call of the wild* is decivilized from a domestic dog to a leader of wolf pack, while White Fang is civilized from a wild wolf to a domesticated dog. To me, it's natural to combine them into a whole. By looking into the two dogs, I shall lay my importance on the relationship between the protagonists and the writer. Since that Jack endowed his dog protagonists with the human qualities, what kind of qualities he expected to present? How these qualities were connected with himself? The following will explain from the psychological way.

## 2. The Analysis of Daydreams

To show how Buck in *The Call of the wild* and White Fang in *White Fang* devoted and loyal to their masters, it is evitable to make sure what kind of masters are deserved this loyalty.

### 2.1 Buck and His Masters

Before he turned into a leader of the wolves he had served for five masters—Judge Miller and his families, Perrault and Francois, a Scotch half-breed, Charles, Mercedes and Hal, and John Thornton. They owned Buck in turns while only the last one is considered to be the best one. For at the crucial moment when Buck was beaten to death, it was Thornton who saved Buck from the edge of death. For another reason, in contrast to the relationship of Buck with other masters, the one between him and Thornton is ideal in Jack's mind. And even Buck's relationship with the Judge has been a “stately and dignified friendship”, but he “had travel too often with the judge not to know the sensation of riding in a baggage car”, Buck proves to be the judge's good companion, but

there's no affection or love in their relationship. After being kidnapped from the home, Buck was given the first lesson by a man in red sweater, "a man with a club is a lawgiver, a man must to be obeyed, thought not necessarily conciliated". The next masters, Francois, for example, he showed great mercy to Buck, he brought his food ration to him, sacrificed the tops of his own moccasins to make another four for fitting over Buck's paw. His complete devotion to work won the respect from Buck. However, the purpose for what they are doing is to endow dogs special power to deliver dispatches. Buck's unyielding spirit won Thornton's sympathy and the realization of justice. Thornton tried to keep him in his own camp and helped him to recover. Thornton treated him like his own children in the way that totally different from other masters. Finally, enlightened by love and understanding, they managed to narrow down the boundary between human being and animals and found a special way to express affection to each other, like the relationship between a father and a son.

### 2.2 *White Fang and His Masters*

Compared with Buck served for so many masters, White Fang just did service for three masters—Gray Beaver, beauty Smith and Weedon Scott with his companion and families. White Fang's ideal master Weedon Scott did not appear until the last moment. Weedon is to White Fang what Thornton is to Buck. Weedon brought White Fang a life that is totally different from that with the precious masters. Having endured complete depravity of kindness and dignities, he was addictive to his fight with bull dogs. It was Weedon that interfered and stopped his fight when White Fang was on the verge of being killed. But this was not the end. Even driven been mad by his precious masters, White Fang felt nothing except hatred and contempt at the beginning of his relationship with Weedon. But by the way that Weedon treats him makes him begin to appreciate human beings. He spent a long time in caressing the dog and treats him like an old friend. For White Fang, it was "ending of the old life and the reign of hate. A new and incomprehensibly fairer life was dawning." Weedon represents the compassionate and kind master who can tame a wild beast into a good companion with human beings. In return to each other's love, they gave each other their own deep affection.

### 2.3 *Jack's Life Experience and Addiction to His Dreams*

According to Freud's theory in his *Writers and Dreams*, dream is a sort of being in retrospect, it takes us to an original period. It includes one's childhood. One's childhood is the replay the whole human history to some extent. The role of the dream is the writer himself or his incarnation. When he wrote the two novels, he recalled his misery childhood. Buck and White Fang's hard life is the incarnation of his own. There exists dream displacement. It occurs when we use a "safe" person, event, or object as a "stand-in" to represent a more threatening person, event or object. It is clear that Jack doesn't want himself to be the miserable person, and he tries to escape from the truth. He's willing to live in his dreams.

Jack lived a very hard life in his childhood. We can see the same experience of Buck and White Fang at the beginning of their life. Jack London was deserted by his father William Henry Chaney. He lived with his mother Flora Wellman, a music teacher and spiritualist, and step father John London, in Oakland. His hard experience in California farm had taught him that the wild is horrible. But comparing with his life in London, he realized that the life in cities is much more intolerable. He began to recall his life in the farm in a romantic way. And also his creation of *The Call of the Wild* has something with his life experience at that time. The year 1903 saw Jack's loss in his love. His wife Bess Maddern gave birth to her second daughter, which disappointed him for he had been expecting there would be a son. Furthermore, Bess cared more about her daughter and ignored him, which made him felt that he was completely left out in the cold. As a result, he gradually transferred his attention to another lady--Charmian Kittredge who became his second wife later. *The Call of the Wild* satisfied his desire to depart with Bess. At the end of the novel, Buck made a friend in the wild, who lightened his sorrow of losing Thornton and could be considered the incarnation of Charmian in Jack's mind. Only love could save Jack's marriage, which destroyed by the description of Thornton's death. This proved that Jack's relation with Bess had come to an end. This young man was totally controlled by his desire of sex, selfishness and great expectation to his life.

According to Freud in his *Writers and Dreams*, kinds of illusions and daydreams will be transferred into other images with the change of the daydreamer's understanding to the life and his living environment. Jack's relation deeply effected his creation in *White Fang*. Jack believed that Charmian was his true love and soul-mate who could save him out of his hard time. So Charmian's coming back gave him strength to recover. We can find this from what sick White Fang got from his benefactor Weedon. White Fang, to some extent, expressed his expectation to live a happy life in the civilized society with Charmian.

### 3. The Analysis of Oedipus Complex

According to Freud, the oedipal conflict means the competition with the parent of the same gender for the attention and affection of the parent of the opposite gender. For example, a little boy will aspire sexually for his mother when he was very young, which is unconscious. At the same time, he will show great interest to his father and take him as a god example. This is Oedipus complex briefly. But actually, we can go deeper beyond this. That is, when the boy finds that he will be castrated by his father in this way, he will restrain such an impulse and transform himself into his father's beloved one instead of his mother's. In contrast to this, he will show hatred to his mother. We can find the writer's oedipal complex in the two works.

#### 3.1 *The Relationship with Mother in White Fang*

White Fang's mother was a wanton, offensive, aggressive and wise female wolf, who has something with Flora in common. She was a moody and abnormally emotional woman, but she was very competent and clever. The old one eye wolf that showed his love to his mother could be considered John London. They were both gentle and tolerate. While White Fang is the incarnation of Jack himself. From White Fang's coldness to his father and sisters' death, we can predict that Jack ever expected his father and sisters' death to occupy his mother by his own. The male wolf was described into a single-eyed also shows London's hatred to his fathers. In the novel, there's a situation of fighting among three wolves for the female wolf, which is just another form of oedipal complex. The death of the single-eyed wolf gave freedom to White Fang to own his mother. He was so attached to his mother that he thought her as the center of the universe. But when they reached the tent of the Indians, White Fang had to adventure lonely and he began to hate his mother a little. However, when his mother was taken for hiking, he was so reluctant to leave her. Especially, when they met again, his mother hardly recognized him, which hurt him so deep that there's no space for mother in his heart. Such a relationship is the true reflection between Jack and his mother. When he was young he lost himself in the love of his mother and gave his love to his mother in return. But Flora paid much attention to her séance and her conception of earning money and left Jack with his step-sister, which caused Jack's desperation to his mother.

From psychoanalysis, Jack could not get love from his mother so he turned to his father, in contrast to which a kind of hatred to his mother came into being.

#### 3.2 *Buck is to Thornton What John London is to Jack*

##### 3.2.1 The loyalty and deep love between the "father" and the "son"

In order to be a good companion of Thornton, Buck gave up his animalistic instinct. During his staying with Thornton, he was attracted by the call from the wild for more than one time. And he ever thought to follow it, but he resisted this temptation for the sake of his owner. Running, side by side with his "wild brother" through the forest, he came to realize that he is "answering" the call of the wild. However, he suddenly stopped and returned just on thinking of John Thornton, in spite of the howl of the wolf. "the love for John Thornton drew him back to the fire again ... Thornton alone held him. The rest of mankind was as nothing (Horowitz58)." Buck followed Thornton's command without any hesitation and at anytime when Thornton was in danger he would rescue his master immediately though no instructions were given. Buck even proved his faith to Thornton by saving his life. Thornton's boat overturned, fling him into the cold water. The flows were so rapid even a strong swimmer could hardly survive. Buck didn't hesitate to jump into the water, even Thornton asked him to go back. Buck had a hard time in saving his masters, almost "strangling and suffocating", the man and the dog, both bruised. There, after a careful checking, Thornton found Buck had three broken ribs. Buck's loyalty to his master also was demonstrated by his revenge to those who killed Thornton.

John Thornton is to Buck what John London is to Jack London because Thornton and John really share something in common. Firstly, they have the same name John. Thornton saved Buck and treats him like his own son. John London adopted Jack after he was deserted by his natural father and also treated him like his own son. They both were kind-hearted and got very close to the nature. Thornton was killed by the Yeehats and old John died of sickness when Jack joined the gold rush. All these seem to suggest that Thornton is the incarnation of old John. In this way we can realize the deep love between John and Jack from Thornton and Buck. Thornton awakened the sleeping love in Buck's deep soul, which makes him experience the truehearted love for the first time. In return, Buck was totally faithful to Thornton and in deep love with him. Like Buck, Jack must love his foster father old John for some time when he was young. According to some critics, Jack ever took old John as his idol and they trusted and loved each other.

### 3.2.2 The Conflict between the “Father” and the “Son”

Even Buck was reluctant to leave Thornton, while he did not to be stuck there for the rest of his life. He could not stand answering to the call from his wild brother—the call of the wild every time even he would return on thinking of his master. Thornton became the obstacle in Buck’s way to his paradise which Buck should move. But Buck should repay what Thornton had done for him. The same thing happened to Jack when he was just six years old. From his parents’ dialogue, he knew that his father was not his natural father. So his love to him was gradually transferred to another desire to be grown up as early as possible so that he could leave his father and to be independent. But before that, for him, he should not shoulder his responsibility to compensate the debt he owed his father. This is why in his novel he made up the plots like this. For example, Buck saved Thornton for two times from the edge of death and won him 1600 dollars, besides, helped him to find the gold mineral. The dream that cannot be realized in the real life has come true in the novel—his daydream. After Buck doing his job, he could not reject his great longing any more for the wild where he belonged to. But Thornton was still here to stop him. So he had to give a chance to the Yeehats to kill Thornton. Jack seems not to conceal his impulse to eliminate his barrier to be independent. Thornton’s death gave Buck freedom to go to the wild and he became the leader of the wolves at last even he also felt desperately sorrowful for his master’s death. But what he had first was the delight to get free and then the grief. We can predict how Jack reacted to his father’s death. The reason why we are attracted by the two novels maybe is we have identified with the protagonists who can arouse the deep impulse of human beings—the complicated feelings to our parents.

### 4. Jack’s Conflict between the Civilized Society and the Wild Nature

The two novels go in completely contrary directions. Besides the explanation of the consciousness of daydream, there must be something more about the writer himself. Let’s back to the text itself.

Buck was a faithful dog in the judge’s house at first but after being kidnapped he was gradually used to living in the wild, and expected to go back to the wild at last. The original instinct of an animal awakened him and attracted him to the wild. But for the sake of love to Thornton, he hesitated to leave him; as a result, he lost in a helpless contradiction. He did not leave him until he was killed by the Yeehats. White Fang was totally different from Buck. He was ever a wolf in the wild. Under the guidance of his mother, he stepped into the civilized society and became an indispensable member of it. Buck and White Fang lingered between the wild and the civilized, which is the real reflection of Jack’s life.

Jack was born in a very poor family, so he looked forward to a better life when he was young and he determined to be one of the upper ranks. But when he succeeded, he found that the life was not he was expecting for. His dreams were destroyed and he considered going back to the country again. For him, it is not an easy job to break away his bounds with the civilized society. He had been fighting for this kind of life for nearly all his life and he had tasted the honey of what he had made efforts for. Jack was not a happy man. He was struggling in his conflict and could not release himself from it. Date back to his childhood, there might be two reasons for his conflict in psychological way—his recognition to his parents, his mother’s emotional instability and consistent movement of the family. According to Freud in his *Writers and Daydreams*, when the children have to resist his oedipal complex, the parent of the other gender that he abandoned will be transferred into something that subsides into himself. His recognition to his parents affects him in different way and come to the top in turns. Whichever side he is in, he will look forward to the other one. In another words, he lingered between the two sides.

### 5. Conclusion

On basis of analysis and discussion we mentioned above, it is no doubt that Jack assigns great number of human qualities to his animal protagonists. His protagonists have a lot of things in common with himself. He experienced the most crucial transition of the development of the society and his stories deeply rooted in his own life. The oedipal complex is reflected by his relationship with his parents, his grieve life experience and his expectation for his dreams, and his hesitation in his return to the wild and the civilization are all demonstrated themselves by the animal characters. In such a psychological way, we can see that his experience gave birth to his works from which we also can draw a clue of his life and know more about his psychology. These humanized animals indict Jack’s experience, and the same time, it also prove that Jack’s view of the world resulted from his experience.

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