

Civilization's Detrimental Effects

“He was a thing of the wild, come in from the wild to sit by John Thornton's fire, rather than a dog of the soft Southland stamped with the marks of generations of civilization,” the narrator of *The Call of the Wild* says of Buck, a dog living in the Alaskan wilderness (London 184). He once lived a domestic life in California but was sold to dog traders. These men shipped him to the Yukon as a sled dog, forever ending his life in civilization. Throughout this novel, there are numerous examples of humanity's attempts to dominate the frozen arctic. However, *The Call of the Wild* maintains that, ultimately, humanity's attempts to subdue nature are ill guided as civilization actually weakens species, making them unable to experience the satisfaction for their true nature.

Through my research, I found the relevance of ecocriticism and its applications to this text. According to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ecocriticism is “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii). In other words, ecocriticism analyzes literature by looking at the text in an “earth-centered approach” (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii). Another author notes, “the widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human” (Garrard 5). *The Call of the Wild* portrays the frozen landscape of Alaska, but its implications about the relationships between humans, animals, and the environment can be applied to the earth as a whole. Arran Stibbe says in *Animals Erased : Discourse, Ecology, And Reconnection With The Natural World*,

We realize that we too are embodied beings who depend for our continued existence on interrelationships with other organisms and the physical environment around us. “Why look at animals?”—because if we do not we might overlook the

fact that we are violating their nature, something that inevitably leads to their suffering as well as ecological damage. “Why look at animals?”—because we can improve our mental health by contact with the nature around us, and find ways to fulfil higher human needs without excess consumption. (190)

The text similarly approaches the subject of suffering imposed by humans whether intentional or not. Perhaps the greatest negative effect civilization causes is its prevention of true fulfillment. It is because of civilization that species, both animal and human, are weakened. Through this, the text argues that humanity should not impose civilization upon the natural world but instead coexist with it. Like any other literary work, it shows this through “characters, plot events, settings, images, and other formal elements” (Tyson 44).

The beginning of the novel opens with Buck living an idyllic life in Santa Clara, seemingly the ideal place for him. He appears to be fully integrated into civilization and leads a content life. However, the story hints that something is missing. Although domesticated by humanity, later passages suggest he is unfulfilled. As Gina Rosetti explains in *Imagining the Primitive in Naturalist and Modernist Literature*, “the story that unfolds focuses on the ‘natural’ reawakening of dormant passions” (48). It is not until he actually enters the wilderness that he realizes he needs more than just a domestic life. According to the novel this is due to the instincts he inherited through evolution:

He sat by John Thornton’s fire, a broad-breasted dog, white-fanged and long-furred; but behind him were the shades of all manner of dogs, half-wolves and wild wild wolves, urgent and prompting, tasting the savor of the meat he ate, thirsting for the water he drank, scenting the wind with him, listening with him

and telling him the sounds made by the wild life in the forest, dictating his moods, directing his actions [...] (London 188)

Although Buck's situation in Santa Clara seems to be as pleasant as possible, the text suggests that Buck is ultimately exploited. He is another example of civilization's attempt to subdue nature, along with the "grape arbors," "orchards," and "berry patches" (London 18). Just as the plants had been changed to be more useful through selective breeding, Buck's ancestors had been domesticated to become companions. This exploitation is portrayed to be cruel and unfair. In John Bruni's *Scientific Americans: The Making of Popular Science and Evolution in Early-Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture*, he states, "In his depiction of cooperation rather than competition between men and dogs in the harsh Yukon environment, London challenges the rationale for the exploitation of animals, the idea of human dominance based on the ability to think in complex and abstract ways" (61). As property and lacking in freedom, Buck is unable to embrace his true wild nature. In his story, he is forced to leave behind his comfortable but constraining life and learn how to survive in his true homeland: the wilderness. One critic notes, "Buck's lifespan arcs from his first years on a California estate, happy but lacking in autonomy; undergoes apprenticeship and hardship, and; later achieves his elemental nature and place in a world that he can control" (Beierl 90).

Buck's existence in Santa Clara seems as though it will last his entire life. However, something changes his fate. The gardener's assistant often "loved to play Chinese lottery," hoping to make winnings through the "system" of gambling and thus better his life (London 24). He is a poor man with "a wife and numerous progeny," looking for an escape from his rough circumstances (London 24). But it is through the lottery that he falls into debt. Desperate, he steals Buck and sells him to dog traders who are shipping dogs out as sled pullers to the gold

rush in Alaska. Once again, civilization treats Buck as property, exploiting him. He is sold to the mail service to be used a laborer.

Buck and the other canines in the mail service team try to find satisfaction through their work. Buck and the other dogs who are employed by the mail service begin to embrace their work, even enjoying it. The narrator records, “The toil of the traces seemed the supreme expression of their being, and all that they lived for and the only thing in which they took delight” (London 63). Humanity takes advantage of the dog’s natural desire to run, harnessing their energy for monetary gain. As Douglas Dowd notes in *Capitalism and Its Economics: A Critical History*,

Throughout its history, capitalist profitability has required, and capitalist rule has provided, ever-changing means and areas of exploitation. The central relationship making this possible is the ownership and control of productive property: a small group that owns and controls, and a great majority that does not, and whose resulting powerlessness requires them to work for wages simply to survive. (5)

Even though here it is capitalism that is the detrimental element, there are many other aspects of civilization that are painted in a negative light.

The mail service uses the animals until they have no more to give. The text records, “They were short of weight and in poor condition when they made Dawson, and should have had a ten days’ or a week’s rest at least. But in two days’ time they dropped down the Yukon bank... loaded with letters for the outside” (London 128). It is not the sled drivers’ fault but, rather, society’s. The drivers do care about the sled dogs and seem to have a strong connection with them. “The drivers were fair through it all, and did their best for the animals. Each night the dogs were attended to first,” reads the text (London 129). The two sled drivers try to keep the dogs

motivated, kindly treating them: “Mush on, poor sore feets,” the driver encouraged them as they tottered down the main street of Skaguay. “Dis is de las” (London 142). Furthermore, the drivers themselves are exhausted. One imagines what their break will be like, mulling, “Den we get one long res’. Eh? For sure. One bully long res” (142). Both animals and humans are put on the line for a convenience, a triviality. The letters are just a luxury, and yet the group is forced to push through in an unreasonable time. Instead of being rewarded for their actions, the dogs are used until they are barely empty shells. Then, to make the abuse even worse, the mail service sells them to an unexperienced family group.

This family knows neither how to work with the dogs nor how to survive in the Klondike. Instead of letting the animals rest, Hal, Charles, and Mercedes immediately head out. The dogs are sent out again in an exhausted state. Besides that, Hal mistakes their exhaustion for laziness, and angrily announces, “They’re lazy, I tell you, and you’ve got to whip them to get anything out of them’ ” (149). As such, the animals are punished for something they have no control over. Many of the traits the family developed in civilization cause a great deal of pain for their animals. One of these is purposeful cruelty. In the novel, Nature is shown to be a harsh place where animals and people are subjected to the law of “club and fang” (48). Suffering is a part of the rules of survival. However, pain is not delivered out of cruelty. On the other hand, Hal takes his frustration out on the dogs, beating them. He announces, “They’re lazy, I tell you, and you’ve got to whip them to get anything out of them” (149). They are subjected to even more suffering through the naivety and softness Mercedes developed in civilization. Even a seemingly positive trait of civilization, mercy, is portrayed as a weakness:

And Buck was merciless... [m]ercy did not exist in the primordial life. It was misunderstood for fear, and such misunderstandings made for death. Kill or be

killed, eat or be eaten, was the law; and this mandate, down out of the depths of Time, he obeyed. (187)

Mercy has no place in the fierce Wild. Mercedes cannot not understand this. She feels sorry for the animals and overfeeds them. Later, this results in their starvation. When Hal and Charles discover how little food is left, they cut the rations in half. “Hal awoke one day to the fact that his dog-food was half gone and the distance only a quarter covered...” says the novel of the discovery of Mercedes’ mistake (157). Unfortunately, many of the dogs are unprepared for these rations, and cannot survive off of them. Furthermore, Mercedes is used to being pampered. She “was pretty and soft, and had been chivalrously treated all her days” (161). As such, she “persisted in riding on the sled” (161). The dogs quickly begin dying off, and those that do live barely survive. Still the party keeps on, until, “They were not half living, or quarter living. They were simply so many bags of bones in which sparks of life fluttered faintly” (164). Finally, the party’s choices result in the entire group’s death. Instead of listening to sound advice, they attempt to cross a half-thawed river. This leads to all falling beneath the ice. The dogs are killed, never having been able to reach true satisfaction. They attempted to find contentment with civilization’s ways, and put their lives in her hands, only to be betrayed. In this way, the text implies that they cannot reach contentment in work alone because those they work for will eventually take advantage or betray them.

It is not only the dogs who are unable to find satisfaction. The family is obviously used to comfort, and their higher class culture ways set them up for failure. There can be only two possibilities for their decision to seek gold: a change in financial fortune, or greed. Whatever the case may be, they are completely unprepared for the Alaskan wilderness. From their excess packing, to their cluelessness on how to treat sled dogs, to their lack of leadership skills, it

quickly becomes obvious they are set up for disaster. And disaster it soon becomes. After some time on the trail they begin to realize their own inability and their moral drops. The novel explains, “Shorn of its glamour and romance, Arctic travel became to them a reality too harsh for their manhood and womanhood” (65). Their time in civilization left them soft and unable to properly live in the wild. This family party neither sees the beauty of nature around them, nor is able to achieve true satisfaction:

It was beautiful spring weather, but neither dogs nor humans were aware of it... [a]nd amid all this bursting, rending, throbbing of awakening life, under the blazing sun and through the soft-sighing breezes, like wayfarers to death, staggered the two men, the woman, and the huskies. (169).

Here the passage describes life teeming all around the family party, but they can take no joy from their surroundings because they are suffering. Their suffering stems from the inexperience and softness they developed in civilization. And of course, in the end, they cannot experience fulfillment for their true natures because they are dead, killed by the weaknesses they acquired in civilization.

There is one human in the story who seems to be satisfied. Of all the people in the novel, John Thornton seems to be the most fulfilled. He knows how to survive in nature, and is skilled in living off the land. The text suggests this is the most satisfying way to live.

John Thornton asked little of man or nature. He was unafraid of the wild. With a handful of salt and a rifle he could plunge into the wilderness and fare wherever he pleased and as long as he pleased. Being in no haste, Indian fashion, he hunted his dinner in the course of the day’s travel; and if he failed to find it, like the

Indian, he kept on travelling, secure in the knowledge that sooner or later he would come to it. (216)

However, one part of civilization still keeps a grip on him—greed. Instead of accepting the true satisfaction he could experience, he holds on to his desire for monetary riches. As *Greed: Developmental, Cultural, and Clinical Realms* states, “The inconsolable, excessive, and interpersonally-ruthless pressure that characterizes greed ends up hurting self and others. The resulting harm can have devastating and life-altering effects” (Akhtar xvii). Instead of being satisfied with his peaceful life in the wilderness, he heads on a quest for gold, traveling until he comes to a valley where “The gold was stacked in moose-hide bags, fifty pounds to the bag, and piled like so much firewood outside the spruce-bough lodge” (219). Thornton finds a valley filled with treasure, but unbeknownst to him, this is the dwelling place of the Yeehat tribe. They find him living on their land and kill him. If he had not sought gold, he could have lived in a near utopia with Buck and never trespassed upon the Yeehats. However, he was brought down by trait that only those within civilization possess.

Buck is the only being within the book who is able to return to the wild from civilization. Not only does he survive, he finds true satisfaction there. The text describes,

When the long winter nights come on and the wolves follow their meat into the lower valleys, he may be seen running at the head of the pack through the pale moonlight or glimmering borealis, leaping gigantic above his fellows, his great throat a-bellow as he sings a song of the younger world, which is the song of the pack. (254)

Furthermore, as this quotation shows, he is able to integrate himself into wolf society. The reason Buck is such a fascinating character is because unlike the other domesticated dogs in the book,

he is able to leave the traits of civilization behind him. The closest that come to embracing their wild nature are the huskies, which the text asserts are closer in ancestry to the wolves than the other breeds of dogs. However, Buck's father was a "huge St. Bernard," and his mother was "a Scotch shepherd dog" (22). Amazingly, Buck is able to overcome all the generations of domestication and become like the wolves. "When Darwin formulated his ideas, he knew nothing about genes [...] However, Darwin's suggestion was prophetic: we now know that genes, composed of DNA, contain the codes for behaviour, and that evolution modifies the frequency of genes over generations, and therefore moulds the behaviour of species and individuals," argues the *Ethology of Domestic Animals: an Introductory Text* (Jensen 13). Buck is able to tap into the behaviors programmed into his genes, forsaking the submission he was taught in the civilized world.

Through many instances the text shows the negative effects civilization has on both animals and humans. The strongest charge it levels against civilization is that it prevents species from achieving the fulfillment they could receive by living in true harmony with nature. Buck is used as a vehicle to demonstrate what could happen if species weakened by civilization were able to overcome the weaknesses they developed in civilization. By accepting his wild nature, he finds a satisfaction that he never felt in his domestic life. John Thornton came close to pure harmony with the wilderness, but he held on to greed, a trait instilled into him by society. The novel suggests that if he, like Buck, had let go of the traits he learned in civilization, he could have existed in a near utopia. As Leon Samson says in *Whither Civilization?*, "There are those who would define civilization as Progress" (1). However, *The Call of the Wild* seems to hold a different view: the view that the traits developed in civilization are negative.

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