The Symbolic Meaning of Buck in Different Periods
-- An Analysis of the Call of the Wild

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Abstract

Buck was the protagonist of the famous novel call of the wild. His life in the book can be roughly divided into three parts: pet dog time, transformational period, wolf-dog Buck. These three periods respectively symbolize certain aspects of social reality at that time. In this essay, efforts are made to analyze these symbolic social characters through Buck’s experience.

Keywords
Buck, Symbolic meaning, Darwinism, Determinism.

1. Introduction

After the civil war, American society grew and burgeoned at an unprecedented rate. Industries were thriving, wealth accumulated beyond any countries in the world. Lured by this gilded fantasy, hundreds of thousands of immigrants and peasants left their home for a better future in cities. However, as the society was under the control of Darwinism and Laissez-faire policy, ordinary people’s fate was at the hands of the rich and amoral society. Because of this social background, American naturalism came into being. The call of the wild, as one of the representative works of naturalism, describes the real life of an individual in this amoral society through the analogy of a dog’s life experience. Through analysis of Buck's life experience, this essay intends to describe several social characters of the gilded age and thereby reveal the writer’s central idea in this book.

2. Literature Review

Call of the wild is a paradigm of work of American naturalistic literature. This novel finely describes an animal society under the control of Darwinism. Therefore, a body of articles had explored the naturalistic characteristics from all aspects of this novel. For instance: the characteristic comparison of Buck's four masters, typical scenery analysis, symbolic meaning of certain items and so on. Moreover, based on the common understanding that the protagonist Buck, though being a dog, is the embodiment of Jack London himself. A large number of essays had been devoted to the symbolistic meaning of Buck in mainly two ways: Buck as an animal and Buck as Jack London himself. Comparably, a smaller portion of the articles links the symbol Buck with common people who lived in a Darwinism-controlled human society. This essay intends to explore Buck’s symbolic meaning in human social context and thereby reveal Jock London’s main idea in this book.

3. Pet Dog Buck-- Idealized American Life

Before buck was sold to the north, he was a pet in a distinguished Judge's house. He lived in "sun-kissed Clara Valley," had a wide-spread lawn and a pool as his playground. Not to mention
countless food and drink. The best of all is that he is the "ruler" of this manor. This first period represents the ideal life of all new Americans at that time.

During the late 19th century and the early 20th century, America had witnessed rapid economic growth. With wages being higher than any country in Europe, immigrants and peasants swarmed into big cities to earn themselves a better life in the burgeoning cities. Although the ever-increasing workforce varied in regions, family background, and so on, they all aspired to open up a better life for them and their family. This is the most tender part throughout the whole novel. After this warm manor picture, the reality of the society is revealed.

4. The Changing Buck--Life under the Control of Darwinism

The most prominent idea of Darwinism is "natural selection, the survival of the fittest." This is also the reality of most ordinary people who strive to survive at that time. The transformation of Buck during this period was a typical example of man succumb to the law of Darwinism and alter themselves to fit in the society.

When Buck was first handed over to the dog dealer, he was just a proud, kind dog who was used to be treated with respect and admiration. However, his life changed the moment he was sold. Every time he tried to fight, the tightening rope around his neck would choke him to faint. After two days of travel with nothing to eat, he met the very first man who taught him a lesson of survival. The red-sweater man struck him with a club time after time until he crawled to his feet with bleeding flowing from noses. Buck was defeated, but this fight led him to understand the primitive law. Nevertheless, this is just the first step, and the real challenges came after.

Buck, along with several other dogs, arrived the savage land of the north where the law of club and fang govern the man and dog world. Here, buck witnessed the wolf-like fight to which Curly fell victim for the first time. The image of Curly lay on the bloody ground lifeless shock him and convinced him that he would never go down for once down, that is the end of one's life. These two things changed Buck. He abandoned his old pride and dignity and determined to do his best in this new world. Gradually, buck learned his rope in this new world and began to thrive. From Billee, he learned to dig a hole to combat coldness. He stole meat and let another dog take the fault. In doing so, he abandoned his old morality and being in line with natural law. He was placed between Dave and Sol-leks so that he could receive instructions through their sharp teeth whenever he made mistakes. Under the harsh supervision from other dogs and his masters, Buck soon proved himself as a wonderful sledge dog. During this process, his body also developed to fit in the environment: iron-like muscle, callousness in the face of pain, capable of digesting all food, acute hearing. Through toil and hardship, all these traits had been selected by nature. Therefore, time to be the fittest had come. Being occupied with work, Buck always tried to avoid any confrontation with the leader wolf, Spitz. However, as Buck grew increasingly stronger, Spitz began to irritate buck. First, he trespassed Buck's nest. Then, he treacherously attacked buck when every dog, including Buck was severely injured. He also took the chance of Dolly going mad to spring on Buck as he was exhausted with the chase. Being the strongest is Spitz's pride, but Buck was gradually outgrowing him and possessed enormous potential. The conflict between these two strongest dogs was inevitable. In the end, Buck successfully turned other dogs against Spitz, defeated him completely, and became the new leader of the team.

Buck’s experience was typical at that time. After the civil war, America became the most highly industrialized country in the world. Every day, countless people were lured to the cities, trying to achieve their dream. However, the real society under the influence of money-worship and Darwinism was cold and callous. Capitalists broke and made their own moral rules at their will. While the life of the rich provides the fantasy of city dream, ordinary workers worked day after night in exchange for the salary that barely feed themselves. In this amoral world, there is no justice, fairness, or care. In order to survive, individual had no free will but to follow the
game of the rich and buried their morality. One example is sister Carrie. She came to city with aspiration. She believed that her education would help her secure her a place here. However, the reality was more than frustrating. Being a mistress was the only choice for her in this amoral society. Fierce competition was also a typical trait of the time. And the level of fierceness was no less than the animal world. As unskilled workers outnumbered the demand, people competed like dogs for a job opportunity. Being weak and less competitive, the outcome could be as bad as death.

5. **Wolf Buck - Fate at the Hands of Determinism**

Determinism emphasizes the heredity and environment influence on individual. It is also one of the main characters of Americanism, which indicates man’s inability in front of his destined fate. Buck was also under the control of his destined fate. However, he was luckier than others. From the very beginning, the dog dealer, the mail deliverer, and others knew that Buck would make an excellent sledge dog, he was strong and highly motivated by nature. He learned everything faster than dogs. He was brave enough to fight against other wild dogs but smart enough not to fight against the club. Although experiencing various tortures, competitions and tests from nature, Buck could always tough them out. Buck even save Thornton several times from various danger. This story seemed like a motivating tale of an inspiring individual becoming successful through endeavor and perseverance, but it is not that simple. Heredity played a major role in his success. Buck came from an excellent race. Both of his parents belonged to distinguished races in dog species. From his parents, he inherited his intelligence, physical strength, and other outstanding characters that support him become a winner in the new world.

Buck is lucky because his inherent characters serve as his edge in success. However, most people are not. Buck was the winner, which means others were losers. Although Spitz was an experienced lead dog with much prestige among others, he still failed to compete with Buck because Buck was destined to win, so he had to lose.

Another example of the power of Determinism was Buck’s choice to become a Wolf. It is the result of both heredity and environment.

It is commonly accepted that the wolf was the ancestor of the dog. Buck, in the end, answered the call from the wild and reverted to a wolf. Ever since Buck was hit by the dog dealer, his wolf instinct had been aroused. As he evolved or we can say he devolved in the face of the wild nature, this instinct grew stronger and stronger. This urge did not only develop during harsh environments in order to fit into the competitive and amoral world. Even after he was protected by Thornton and lived with him peacefully, it never ebbed and grew even stronger. Whenever he had nothing better to do, the image of his ancestors would flow into his mind. He spent an increasingly amount of time with the pack with days not coming back. In the end, he completely joined the wild when his only love Thornton was killed. However, if Buck was never sold to others, he would be a pet dog forever without alteration. Since his environment changed, his transformation was inevitable.

Becoming a wolf for Buck is a better choice than being a pet dog forever. But the environment does not always drive people to the right direction. In *The Cop and the Anthem*, Soapy was never given a chance. He tried everything to get himself caught, but nothing was more useful than just doing nothing. The social environment determined that he would never recover and stood on his feet again.
6. Conclusion

Through Buck's transformation, Jack London described a harsh, competitive humane world where love faded away eventually, only strength and compromise were the key to the end. In the end, Buck has survived the natural selection and become the fittest of his kind. He and Thornton together created a harmonious life, much like his old one. However, Buck still chose to answer the call of the wild, not only because of Thornton’s death but for his loathsome towards human society. Via Buck's choice, Jack London expressed his yearning for a world without contamination from injustice and treachery of human society. All the sufferings are created by men and imposed on man. The call of the wild actually comes from the within.

References