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## BLESSED WOLF: AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF JACK LONDON'S WHITE FANG

DR.SURESH FREDERICK

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**Abstract:** Nature and literature are interconnected. Literature always portrays nature in its reality. Jack London in clear terms explains the life of a wolf-dog in his famous White Fang. Without missing any minute detail, Jack London brings out the life of a wild animal. With the help of ecocriticism, the paper tries to analyse the novel and tries to evince ecowisdom from the novel.

**Keywords:** coexistence, ecocriticism, interconnected, wolf.

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The human beings and the non-human beings share this beautiful biosphere. The human beings have always taken the role of the master and want to control the others. Some of the nonhumans like the dog, the cat, horse and the cow have surrendered to the might of the human beings. But some others have shown their might to fight against the hegemony of the human beings. In the long list of wild animals comes the wolf. The wolf is one of the most hated animals in the world. It is a species of canid, native to the wilderness and the remote areas of North America, Eurasia, and North Africa. Canid hybrids are the result of interbreeding between different species of the canine (dog) family. It is similar in general appearance to a German shepherd, or sled dog, but has not followed the footsteps of the dog to become domesticated. It is predominantly mottled grey in colour. This wild animal becomes the focal point of this research article. Ecocriticism has gained the attention of many, because of its earth-centred approach. It emerged as an academic discipline in the 1990s, although its roots go back to the late 1970s. It has become known as a field of literary study that addresses how humans relate to nonhuman nature or ecology in literature. The term "ecocriticism" was coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". This study cannot be carried out without a keen understanding of ecology. That you want to designate with a certain style, then select the appropriate name on the style menu. The style will adjust your fonts and line spacing. Do not change the font sizes or line spacing to squeeze more text into a limited number of pages. Use italics for emphasis; do not underline. Jack London (1876 - 1916) is an American novelist and short story writer. His passionate stories of human beings and animals, against a harsh environment, are drawn mainly from his own experience. He has spent time in the Klondike during the Gold Rush and at various times as a seaman, sealer, and so on. He is still remembered for his brilliant novels like *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*, both set in the Klondike Gold Rush. No one can deny the place of *White Fang* among the great American classics. The novel, *White Fang*, is named

after a wolf-dog, *White Fang*. *White Fang* is the protagonist of the novel. Fang means a large, sharp tooth, esp. A canine tooth of a dog or wolf. This white fang gains its name because of its large and sharp tooth. *White Fang* is not a pure dog breed, it is an offspring of a wolf and wolf-dog cross breed. He starts his life in the wild. Much of *White Fang* is written from the viewpoint of the canine character, enabling Jack London to explore how animals view their world. Jack London has a dedicated eye for nature. With passion he explains the minute details of animal behaviour. He elucidates the life of *White Fang* with elaborate facts.

"He was different from his brothers and sisters. Their hair already betrayed the reddish hue inherited from their mother, the she-wolf; while he alone, in this particular, took after his father. He was the one little grey cub of the litter" (WF 47).

He explains how *White Fang* has dominant genes, from his father. It includes phenotypic (outer appearance) variability.

"He had bred true to the straight wolf-stock - in fact, he had bred true to old One Eye himself, physically, with but a single exception, and that was he had two eyes to his father's one" (WF 47).

This truth is going to be the base for this paper, because, *White Fang* is predominantly a wolf and many call him a wolf-dog, but how this wolf-dog becomes a dog is the basic point to be noted. Jack London elucidates how, inch by inch, life grows in this biosphere. *White Fang* is an intelligent cub. Even before his eyes are opened, he knows his two brothers and his two sisters. He is clever enough to feel the touch of his mother. The world of the wild is a safe world.

"... He had no knowledge of the wide world outside, he was never oppressed by the narrow confines of his existence" (WF 47).

Thus he lives in two paradises in one, as he is a wild animal as well a tiny cub under his mother's protection, where no one can oppress him.

"The light from it (sun) had beat upon his sealed lids, and the eyes and the optic nerves had pulsed to little, sparklike flashes, warm-coloured and strangely pleasing. ... The life ... had yearned toward this light

and urged his body toward it in the same way that the cunning chemistry of a plant urges it toward the sun" (WF 48).

Jack London goes on to explain how these tender animals are attracted towards the light like tendrils of a vine which go in search of light.

"Always, in the beginning, before his conscious life dawned, he had crawled toward the mouth of the cave.... The light drew them as if they were plants; the chemistry of the life that composed them demanded the light as a necessity of being; and their little puppet-bodies crawled blindly and chemically, like the tendrils of a vine" (WF 48).

Thus Jack London helps the readers to peep into the life of a wild cub. As Gary Snyder declares, "Wildness can said to be the essential nature of nature" (Coupe 127).

Thus through these minute elaborations Jack London makes the readers sip from the essence of the essential nature of nature. The novelist brings out the wild in its unique hues. In that wild, many animals live and fight for the same living space. One such animal living in the vicinity is a lynx. A lynx is any of the four species within the Lynx genus of medium-sized wildcats. Even though the lynx is inferior to the wolf, it is able to kill the wolf to protect its kittens. White Fang's father, One Eye, goes as a predator looking for a prey and ends up as a prey. The food cycle is vital in the wild. White Fang's father, One Eye, plays a major role in bringing food to the cubs. When there is famine, he becomes restless.

"One Eye was desperate. He ranged far and wide, and slept but little in the lair that had now become cheerless and miserable" (WF 50).

White Fang's mother, Kiche, also tries its best to bring meet for these carnivorous cub/pups.

"The she-wolf, too, left her litter and went out in search of meat" (WF 50).

One Eye tries its best to thief from a nearby the Indian camp, when the food is not available in the wild because of harsh weather conditions. The reader comes to know of the death of White Fang's father when, White Fang's mother goes in search of him and finds him killed by a lynx. She also notices "many signs of the battle" where lair had won "the victory" (WF 51). The wild animal has to live at the edge of life every time it goes in search of food. Even though the lynx is a wild cat and inferior in many ways the wolf fails because the lynx fights to save its kittens. White Fang's mother understands the reality, does

"Not dare[d] to venture in" (WF 51) and leaves the place sensibly. In the wild, inferior animals can also sometimes overturn stronger opponents. Later also, she even avoids that place because the lynx with a litter of kittens is a "fierce, bad-tempered creature

and a terrible fighter" (WF 51).

Jack London emphatically says that in the wild landscape the animals have to face real danger for the sake of food.

After White Fang's father dies, whenever White Fang's mother leaves the cubs to get food and goes for "hunting expeditions" (WF 52), White Fang is curious to go out of the cave. But he understands that he should not go out because of his mother's angry reaction. After this, Jack London elaborates on the way the cub grows in difficulties. White Fang, as a small cub, starts hunting. He can barely walk. "Born to be a hunter of meat (though he did not know it), he blundered upon meat just outside his own cave-door on his first foray into the world. It was by sheer blundering that he chanced upon the shrewdly hidden ptarmigan nest. He fell into it" (WF 56). Ptarmigan is the common name of birds of the genus Lagopus. This bird is a small one and usually lives in cold upland areas. Thus the reader comes to know of a unique bird living in that locale. The first hunting expedition of the tiny White Fang is beautifully elaborated by the writer.

"He ... smashed through the leafage and stalks of a small bush, and in the heart of the bush, on the ground, fetched up in the midst of seven ptarmigan chicks" (WF 56).

Jack London elaborates further.

"They made noises, and at first he was frightened at them. Then he perceived that they were very little, and he became bolder. They moved. He placed his paw on one, and its movements were accelerated. This was a source of enjoyment to him. He smelled it. He picked it up in his mouth. It struggled and tickled his tongue. At the same time he was made aware of a sensation of hunger. His jaws closed together" (WF 56-57).

The writer takes pleasure in elaborating how White Fang eats the prey.

"There was a crunching of fragile bones, and warm blood ran in his mouth. The taste of it was good. This was meat, the same as his mother gave him, only it was alive between his teeth and therefore better. So he ate the ptarmigan. Nor did he stop till he had devoured the whole brood. Then he licked his chops in quite the same way his mother did, and began to crawl out of the bush" (WF 57).

Jack London goes into the mind of the nonhuman to give a life-like picture.

White Fang faces the repercussion immediately, as he is immediately attacked by the mother ptarmigan. In the beginning, he does not know how to defend himself. But later, he is able to fight against that bird. "Then he became angry. He rose up, snarling, striking out with his paws. He sank his tiny teeth into one of the wings and pulled and tugged sturdily. The

ptarmigan struggled against him, showering blows upon him with her free wing. It was his first battle. He was elated" (WF 57). At this juncture, the reader is reminded of how nature is interconnected and its elements are mutually interdependent. As a predator, White Fang lives on weak animals. White Fang grows in confidence. "The lust to kill was on him. He had just destroyed little live things. He would now destroy a big live thing" (WF 57). He comes to know that he is worthy of living.

"He was realising his own meaning in the world; he was doing that for which he was made - killing meat and battling to kill it. He was justifying his existence, than which life can do no greater; for life achieves its summit when it does to the uttermost that which it was equipped to do" (WF 57-58).

Another bird which comes into focus is the hawk. When the mother ptarmigan escapes from that place, it becomes the victim of a hawk.

"But the cub saw... the swift downward swoop of the hawk, the short skim of its body just above the ground, the strike of its talons in the body of the ptarmigan, the ptarmigan's squawk of agony and fright, and the hawk's rush upward into the blue, carrying the ptarmigan away with it" (WF 58).

The ptarmigan in this novel is attacked and its chicks are eaten by White Fang and ultimately killed by a hawk. The truth is, again it shows how animals coexist even among adverse situations, whereas, the human beings will not allow mutualistic existence in that place. They not only kill the animals but also take over the land to build mansions and thereby destroy the habitat. The next animal mentioned in the novel is a weasel. Weasels are mammals forming the genus *Mustela* of the *Mustelidae* family. Weasels feed on small mammals.

"He saw a weasel leaping swiftly away from him. It was a small live thing, and he had no fear. Then, before him, at his feet, he saw an extremely small live thing, only several inches long, a young weasel, that, like himself, had disobediently gone out adventuring.

It tried to retreat before him" (WF 60).

Weasels have a reputation for cleverness, quickness and guile. Suddenly White Fang is attacked by the mother weasel. The fight between these two animals is elaborated by the novelist. At last White Fang is about to lose the battle. Fortunately his mother comes and saves him from the jaws of death. The mother's protection is needed in this wild or out of it. When White Fang's father tries to get food, it faces the wrath of the lynx, the wild cat.

"It was all very well for half a dozen wolves to drive a lynx, spitting and bristling, up a tree; but it was quite a different matter for a lone wolf to encounter a lynx - especially when the lynx was known to have a litter of hungry kittens at her back" (WF 51).

Jack London brings out the protective heart of a mother.

"But the Wild is the Wild, and motherhood is motherhood, at all times fiercely protective whether in the Wild or out of it; and the time was to come when the she-wolf, for her grey cub's sake, would venture the left fork, and the lair in the rocks, and the lynx's wrath" (WF 51).

In this fight, White Fang's father loses his life. When White Fang as a small cub, attacks a brood of ptarmigan and eats the tiny chicks, the mother ptarmigan comes with great anger to attack the small cub.

"He encountered a feathered whirlwind. He was confused and blinded by the rush of it and the beat of angry wings. He hid his head between his paws and yelped. The blows increased. The mother ptarmigan was in a fury" (WF 57).

In this encounter, the stronger wolf cub overwhelms the weak bird. Later as a cub, he meets a tiny weasel. When he is about to attack that animal, the weasel's mother comes with great anger.

"He turned it over with his paw. It made a queer, grating noise. The next moment the flash of yellow reappeared before his eyes. He heard again the intimidating cry, and at the same instant received a sharp blow on the side of the neck and felt the sharp teeth of the mother-weasel cut into his flesh" (WF 60).

When White Fang is about to lose his fight, his mother comes and saves him. White Fang's mother pours out her love by licking him.

"The cub experienced another access of affection on the part of his mother. ... She nozzled him and caressed him and licked the cuts made in him by the weasel's teeth. Then, between them, mother and cub, they ate the blood-drinker, and after that went back to the cave and slept" (WF 61).

Now the weasel becomes a prey to the wolves. Thus in the wild, the mother of the animals protects or tries to protect them. In this world, all animals need protection. The human being is the only animal, in the name of domestication, who takes over the pups and the cubs of the wild, and treats them mercilessly.

As a strong predator, wolves live on the other animals. But when it comes to wild cats with kittens, they use their prudence. Thus, it is clear that there is a clear-cut interconnectedness in this wild ecosystem. In 'The social construction of nature', Terry Gifford claims,

"Wild' as in wild ecosystem - richly interconnected, interdependent and incredibly complex" (Coupe 176). It is clear that there are predators and preys in this wild ecosystem. In ecology, predation describes a biological interaction where a predator feeds on its prey. In the beginning of the novel, Jack London

describes the wild landscape in which his story is going to take place. He depicts the land as desolate and lifeless. In an unambiguous way, he calls the land wild.

“Wild, the savage, frozen-hearted Northland Wild”  
(WF 3).

Even in that difficult terrain, there is life.

“Down the frozen waterway toiled a string of wolfish dogs” (WF 3).

These dogs are, as London puts it, “wolfish dogs” because human beings are there. They are the reason for such half-breeds. They are using these dogs for pulling sledges. They have made sledges to suit the condition. Human beings are successful on this biosphere, because of the adaptability and the ability to cunningly make animals their slaves. In the beginning of the novel, the bitter side of the wild landscape is brought out by the writer. Two men, Bill and Henry, and their sled dog team go on a journey to deliver a coffin to a remote town named Fort McGurru in the higher area of the Yukon Territory, Canada. They are hunted by a large pack of starving wolves over the course of numerous days. Finally, after all of their dogs and Bill have been eaten, Henry escapes from the wolves. This tragedy happens, because the human beings have to cross through a terrain which belongs to the wild animals. And another reason is the famine which has come to haunt the whole place. “The wolf is branded as an intruder and it sniffs with the help of the wind to kill humans. In reality, the truth is the other way round. Humans have intruded into the habitats of the wolf and indiscriminately killed them and other wild animals”(Frederick 35). Some critics feel that the first portion of the novel does not fit in to the later part of the story. I disagree with this and strongly feel that Jack London wants to show the ecological condition that prevails in that area. Domestication is a bane for all the animals living on the face of the earth. A strong animal like the wolf is brought to its knees by hunting and domestication. Throughout the novel, White Fang faces a lot of hardships. Before he is a year old, White Fang is captured by an Indian, Gray Beaver, who trains him as a sled dog. White Fang has a hard life there. He comes under attack by an older dog, Lip-Lip. His only guard, his mother, is traded by Gray Beaver to pay a debt. When White Fang tries to follow his mother downstream, he is recaptured by the Indian and brutally beaten. Those bruises teach him to obey the human beings. Gray Beaver is tricked into selling his dog to a man named Beauty Smith. Beauty Smith is a very bad man. His name does not match his behaviour. He tortures White Fang and makes him an “arch fiend”(WF 130), and this earns it the reputation of being a “The Fighting Wolf”(WF

130), living a public life in a cage. He is mocked at and persecuted by the onlookers as well as Beauty Smith. Both his masters, Gray Beaver and Beauty Smith, do not show him any kindness whatsoever. He learns to obey the stick that is freely wielded by his masters. Because of the brutal behaviour of the humans White Fang becomes violent and ill-tempered. It is clear that domestication is thrust on the wild animals. Arne Naes believes that

“...at a fundamental level, all organisms are ‘intrinsically related’ in a biospherical net or field”(Palmer 213-214).

This intricately related nature is clearly brought out by the author. White Fang, from the beginning, has the quality of a predator. In the wild, the relationship between the predator and the prey is clearly brought out by the novelist. This essential interrelationship plays a vital role in human existence. Eugene P.Odum in *Fundamentals of Ecology* says,

“Since no organism can exist by itself without an environment, our first principle may well deal with the interrelation”(8).

Jack London depicts animals like the lynx, the ptarmigan and so on. These animals are also interconnected in this novel. They, in many ways, form as a food cycle. Writing on ecology, William Rueckert says,

“By its very nature it is concerned with complex interactions and with the largest sets of interrelationships” (Glottfelty 112).

White Fang comes through many interactions with the human beings and non-human beings. The relations with non-human beings are cherishable, whereas human beings, except Scott in the novel, are bitter. This is because the human beings do not fall into any cooperative arrangement. The wild ecosystem is richly interconnected, interdependent and incredibly complex. This incredibly complex system which is richly interdependent and interconnected is not understood by the humans. That is why they do not want to be part of such a rich system.

**Conclusion:** Weedon Scott is the only character who stands out in contrast. He is White Fang’s first loving master. He saves White Fang from the bulldog and slowly gains White Fang’s trust, and finally his love. When he leaves the wild for city life, White Fang also willingly accompanies him. Scott’s kindness to White Fang totally transforms the dog into a faithful and gentle pet. In the new home, Judge Scott, Weedon Scott’s father, does not trust White Fang. Judge Scott believes in White Fang only when he saves his life. He then calls the dog the “Blessed Wolf”. In fact, the human beings are the blessed ones to have such a wonderful animal as a coinhabitant in this biosphere.

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MA.,M.Phil., PhD., PGDJMC.,  
Associate Professor & UG Head,  
Department of English,Bishop Heber College,  
Tiruchirappalli – 620 017,Tamil Nadu, India  
[sfheber@gmail.com](mailto:sfheber@gmail.com)