

Virtue and the  
destructive drive in  
"the call of the wild"  
essay sample



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Buck is the canvas upon which London delineates the ruthless and predatory world characteristic of both civilization and wilderness. For London's work offers no apology for Nature and her violent ways. Nor does it uphold civilization as a redeeming and cleansing mechanism from which emerges a safer and less hostile world. *The Call of the Wild* is grounded on the principle that life, within and without civilization, for Man and beast alike, is essentially unforgiving—fear is its greatest ally and dominance is its religion. Survival and self-preservation are its goals. Civilization is but a tissue-thin veneer attempting, but often failing to defeat the slumbering, but by no means extinct, primal and destructive drive.

Buck is initially a creation of the pampered and insulated life afforded him by Judge Miller and his family. When London (1967) writes: " Buck did not read the newspapers or he would have known that trouble was brewing not alone for himself, but for every tide-water dog..." (I, p. 7), he is metaphorically referring to Buck's quasi-human orientation. London further strips Buck of his beastliness by describing him as a " sated aristocrat, he had a fine pride in himself, was even a trifle egotistical, as country gentlemen sometimes become because of their insular situation" (p. 9).

Even so Buck's dominating tendency is apparent. He is " neither house-dog nor kennel-dog.... he was king—over all creeping, crawling, flying things of Judge Miller's place, humans included (p. 8-9). Yet Buck's kingdom is only an approximation of the natural domain. The house, with its initial greenery, pampered (and therefore emasculated) animals (" protected by a legion of housemaids armed with broom and mops" ) is no more than an artificial

replica of the primordial, the "younger world" (VII, p. 141) where Buck's mastery and prowess is yet to be unearthed and affirmed.

Consequently, Buck's existence in the Miller's fails to adequately equip him in his first encounter with evil. In a glaring absence of "wolf... and wild cunning... shepherd intelligence and St. Bernard intelligence" (VII, p. 127), Buck "accepted the rope with quiet dignity... he had learned to trust in men he knew" (I, p. 11).

That the first breach of trust occurs right within Buck's utopia signals the destruction of that Eden and the first of his de-civilization. Manuel (whose inside job is reminiscent of the serpent in Paradise) personifies the dissolution of the protective barrier between the "outside", that is, the wild (in this case more as an essence), the domain unknown to Buck; and the "inside", that is, the sheltered world of the Millers. London is beginning to establish the proximity (and at times, oneness) between of both worlds and the forces that define them: trust and betrayal, order and chaos, creation and destruction, humanity and bestiality.

Man makes and unmakes the "civilized" Buck; the dog's entry into the wild is facilitated, above all, by human greed and treachery. One rite of passage, for example, is administered by the "man in the red sweater" whose club leaves an indelible impression in Buck's mind: "That club was a revelation. It was his introduction to the reign of primitive law" (I, p. 18). The club will become for Buck the emblem of human strength, the sole object that stands between him, the predator and man, "the noblest game of all":

Thenceforward he would be unafraid of them except when they bore in their

hands their arrows, spears and clubs" (VII, p. 137). The club-wielding man, whose persona and potency reduces Buck into a prey, is in fact not unfamiliar to Buck. The former, human though he may be, is not a complete "other". In thriving on what is evidently the primal law of domination the club-wielding man is a brother to Buck, only camouflaged in a red sweater, the guise of humanity.

Apart from club-wielding man, the fleeting image of the hairy man is another embodiment of the union of beast and man. His physical form manifests a sub-human quality: "The hair of this man was long and matted .... He did not stand erect, but with trunk inclined forward from the hips, on legs that bent at the knee" (IV, p. 65-66). "The hairy man could spring up into a tree and travel ahead as fast on the ground...." (VII, p. 120).

The hairy man represents the first man raised from the recesses of time. His existence is originally rooted in the realm of the unknown and unknowable. Hence, his apparition is symbolic of the undying primordial haunting the seemingly civilized society. More importantly, the hairy man is fear incarnate. "The salient thing of this other world seemed fear..." (VII, p. 119). Through the image of the hairy man, London highlights the strength and persistence of fear, a force that can transgress boundaries, in time or in space.

Considering the role occupied by Man, or facets of him in re-discovering the primitive strain in Buck (indeed, Man is no less than his teacher), the idea that wildness is exclusive to beasts is demolished. Also, the inevitability and necessity of acting out the primordial essence is emphasized. The "law of

the club and the fang" (II, p. 23) may signify the law of death, but only for the weak. For the strong and vicious (as London shows, the two traits are inseparable) it signifies the code of survival.

" Mercy was a thing reserved for gentler climes" (III, p. 57). Part of Buck's " education" includes the realization that morality should nearly always give way to need: " Civilized, he could have died for a moral consideration... (now he) flee(s) from the defense of a moral consideration and so save his hide" (II, p. 34). Failure to measure up to the primal code is equal to death—the tragic fates of Curly (whose friendly intentions makes her a perfect victim) and Spitz (whose wild strain proves to be of no equal to Buck's) are stark illustrations.

London's bleak portrayal of manmade and natural domains poses a threat to the potency of virtue, most especially love. Yet, the fact that a love such as that of Thornton and Buck thrives proves otherwise. Buck himself is a potent proof. The destructive drive in Buck is significantly toned down, if not balanced by the love of Thornton. Buck's relationship with the most ideal of masters directionalizes his wild strain. It enables Buck to discriminate and categorize (though a somewhat narrow and arbitrary dichotomy of good and bad), a restraining agent in his otherwise indiscriminate animal gestures: " Because of his very great love he could not steal from this man, but from any other man, in any other camp, he did not hesitate an instant" ( VI, p. 99). Thornton is to Buck a kind of moral parameter, a potent reason for defying no less than the call of Nature (VI, p. 101).

So powerful is this love " feverish and burning, that was adoration that was madness" (VI, p. 96) that it reduces Buck's relationship with the Millers (his sole recollection of virtue before Thornton) into a cold and mechanical one, a relationship driven by " civilized" necessity. It transforms his purpose for being and work—he is not so much propelled by duty as he is by love (i. e. Thornton's poignant plea: " As you love me , Buck..." (VI, p. 22).

Is the death of Thornton and Buck's eventual reversion into the wild, then, to be taken as the defeat of virtue? In stressing the power of the inherent, London does not show the frailty and futility of virtue; only that it is not immune to the course of nature. It is part of a cycle of emergence and demise, a cycle which, cruel at that, is infinitely more powerful than life, even death. Thornton may be dead, but his love is not and will never be. For Buck, now a full-pledged killer continues to remember; visiting his master's grave, "...he muses for a time, howling once long and mournfully, ere he departs" (VII, p. 141).

## References

London, J. (1967). *The call of the wild* . New York: Lancer Books.