

The fall into futility: the philosophy of jack london exposed in white fang



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“ It was the masterful and incommunicable wisdom of eternity laughing at the futility of life and the effort of life. It was the Wild, the savage, frozen-hearted, Northland Wild.” In this quote, American author Jack London establishes the key theme of his novel *White Fang*. Throughout this work, London seeks to portray his conception of nature, which is dark, ominous, and all-powerful. In order to convey this belief, he utilizes unique personification and symbolism, a wild setting, and particular vocabulary. Moreover, London reveals his belief that human life is infinitesimal when compared to the all-encompassing power of nature. The very first paragraph of *White Fang* contains intense imagery, signifying its importance in conveying the theme of *White Fang*. Silence and desolation are key images in the opening paragraph. “ A vast silence reigned over the land. The land itself was a desolation, lifeless, without movement, so lone and cold that the spirit of it was not even that of sadness.” It is crucial to analyze London’s portrayal of nature, as it contrasts with alternate depictions of nature in literature. For example, modernist poet Katherine Mansfield gives an entirely different depiction of nature in her poem, *A Very Early Spring*. She writes, “ So many white clouds—and the blue of the sky is cold. Now the sun walks in the forest, He touches the bows and stems with his golden fingers... A wind dances over the fields. Shrill and clear the sound of her waking laughter.” Mansfield depicts nature as active and full of life. London’s portrayal however, utilizes imagery of stillness and silence to evoke the image of nature as lifeless and ominous. “ On every side of them was silence, pressing upon them with a tangible presence.” London personifies silence as a force encroaching on the main characters which evokes an eerie sense of stillness.

In addition to the imagery associated with nature, the symbolism of the “
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narrow oblong box” is crucial to understanding the story. This box first appears as a combination table and seat for the main characters, Bill and Henry. Only later does the reader discover that this box is in fact a coffin, containing the body of Bill and Henry’s friend, Lord Alfred. This coffin symbolizes the constant struggle between nature and man and its eventual outcome. “ On the sled, in the box, lays a third man whose toil was over—a man whom the Wild had conquered and beaten down until he would never move nor struggle again.” Not only does the narrow oblong box serve as a means of exposing Lord Alfred’s fate; it also serves as a device for foreshadowing, because as Bill suffers the same fate later in the novel. Through Lord Alfred’s demise and the narrow oblong box, London imbues the novel with symbols of death and nature’s power over man. He writes, “ It is not the way of the Wild to like movement. Life is an offense to it, for life is movement; and the Wild aims always to destroy movement.” Through the symbol of the oblong box, London emphasizes the stillness of nature and the effect it has on anything that threatens the status quo. Although imagery and symbolism are crucial in establishing the themes in *White Fang*, the setting is also important to London’s portrayal. The setting acts as a vehicle which allows the reader to fully access the imagery and themes of the story. London utilizes setting to establish Bill and Henry’s grueling situation. While he could have selected any uncivilized location, London specifically picked the Alaskan wild. *White Fang* was written in 1906, three years prior to the successful discovery of the North Pole. London’s readers would have seen the the entire Arctic region as mysterious and untamed, therefore allowing his imagery to have deeper impact and re-inforcing his underlying theme.

London would not have achieved this same effect if he had selected a
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different setting other than the “ savage, frozen-hearted, Northland Wild.” Finally, London carefully crafts his word choice to invoke the themes of the novel. One particular word that London uses is “ toil”. In fact, this word appears over five times throughout the first chapter of *White Fang*. The reader can extract tone and meaning from London’s use of toil. First, toil could refer to the physical toil that Bill and Henry have experienced from their plight in the Alaskan wilderness. Tired, hungry, and freezing, Bill and Henry have reached their breaking point. However, it is more likely that toil refers to the constant battle between man and nature that underscores the story. London believed in the futility of life and felt that man existed only to toil. Only upon death would this toil conclude. This is evident in the line, “ On the sled, in the box, lays a third man whose toil was over.” Therefore, the reader can deduce that London’s choice of the word toil was intentional in conveying his viewpoint on life. Moreover, *White Fang* reveals Jack London’s philosophy on both nature and the purpose of man. Throughout the novel, he repeatedly invokes themes of the futility of life, stillness, and the immense power of nature over man. Through his masterful use of literary techniques, London conveys his message to readers. As such, it is nearly impossible for the reader to ignore the author’s point of view, regardless of his or her own opinion.