

Nature vs nurture in jack london's to build a fire and white fang

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Analysis of Characters in Regard to Nature vs. Nurture

Jack London's short stories *To Build A Fire* (1908 edition) and *White Fang* both contain characters that display the theme of nature versus nurture. Based on their actions in the stories, the wolf-dog and Jim Hall would support natural instinct while Judge Scott would be a supporter of nurture over nature. While most of the characters in these short stories express one side of the argument more than the other, they are all capable of demonstrating the other side as well. London often depicts some characters as being more dependant on their natural instincts that help them make decisions and ensure their survival, while other characters act based off of their knowledge. While animals primarily rely on their natural instincts, London shows that this trait is not exclusive to animals through human characters that make actions based off of instinct rather than from experience or learning. Additionally, London shows that behavior based on nurture is not entirely exclusive to humans and that animals can also learn and consequently act based on what they have learned.

The wolf-dog from Jack London's 1908 edition of *To Build a Fire*, relies primarily on natural instinct for most for most of his actions and thoughts. This is first observed towards the beginning of the story when the wolf-dog knows naturally that it is too cold to travel but it has no concept of what specific temperature is like the man does. This demonstrates that the wolf-dog's instinct is far more reliable than man's. Additionally, when the man and wolf-dog stop to rest, the wolf-dog inherently knows how to keep warm while the man struggles to make a fire in order to stay warm, suggesting

that nature is better than nurture in a survival situation. However, the wolf-dog also has learned to trust and respect his owner, this shows the wolf-dog's nurture side and how it has learned to trust and respect the man through his past experiences. Eventually, the wolf-dog outlives the man through the cold weather because his natural instinct is more effective than the man's nurture and whatever knowledge he may have learned about surviving in the cold proved to be less effective. However the wolf-dog diverges from its predominant habits of natural instinct after the man dies "it turned and trotted up the trail in the direction of the camp it knew, where were the other food providers and fire providers" (London). Returning back to where mankind is not a natural instinct for the wolf-dog, it learned that where humans are there is food and companionship.

Judge Scott from Jack London's *White Fang* lives a nurtured lifestyle and consequently would favor nurture over nature. Judge Scott's lifestyle is not physically challenging like it is for characters that found themselves in the harsh conditions of the wilderness. As a result of Judge Scott's sheltered lifestyle he doesn't need to rely as much on natural instinct which is generally associated with survival. Instead Judge Scott's characteristics stem from nurture, and his success is reliant on non survival dependant skills such as social skills and education. Judge Scott eventually adopts White Fang and tries to nurture him into a docile and domesticated animal. Eventually White Fang learns how to act like a tame animal that's appropriate for the family. Judge Scott's impression of his nurtured lifestyle onto White Fang shows the

value of nurture and how it can be beneficial in certain settings such as one where survival instincts are less important in comparison.

Jim Hall, from Jack London's *White Fang*, represents the complete opposite view of Judge Scott. Jim Hall is a very large man who is almost beastlike, bringing back the idea that natural instincts are more animalistic. In addition, the fact that Hall does hard labor all day in the fort suggests that he has had little opportunity to develop any nurtured habits. Also being in the opposite social class and side of the law of Judge Scott aligns similarly with their opposite viewpoints on nature vs nurture.

In conclusion, the characters from Jack London's *White Fang* and *To Build a Fire* contrast different characteristics and viewpoints of the nature vs nurture argument. The wolf-dog displays mainly inherent natural instincts in its behavior while also showing some learned behavior. Judge Scott fully supports nurture given his more sheltered lifestyle, while on the other hand Jim Hall's actions are mainly influenced by instinct, similar to that of an animal yet he is still human. These characters show both man and dog can display any combination of nature and nurture in the way they act, and that one is not entirely separate from the other.