

Naturalism in jack
london's to build a fire
and the call of the
wild research pap...



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Nowadays, literary critics are being well aware of the fact that it was namely throughout the course of late 19th and early 20th centuries, that the naturalist motifs in European and American literature have come to their all-times-high prominence.

In its turn, this can be explained by the fact that, during the course of this historical period, more and more writers have been realizing that Darwin's evolutionary theory, concerned with the survival of the fittest, correlates perfectly well with the essence of human societies' inner dynamics.

As it was noted by Cuddy and Roche (2003): “[In early 20th century] The notion of the survival of the fittest in relation to inherited traits and response to environmental factors became fertile conceptual ground for literary analysis of human nature and society” (22).

The validity of such an idea can be well explored in regards to the literary legacy of one of America's greatest writers – Jack London, as the extreme naturalism of many of his short stories and novels conveys a clearly defined philosophical message – only the objectively existing laws of nature, to which people are being subjected as much as plants and animals, which should be thought of as the basis of true ethics.

According to McClintock (1970): “ Since, for London, science had dislodged idealistic concepts of man, his temperament insisted that affirmations of the human condition, too, have a scientifically justifiable rationale” (336).

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that in literary works of Jack London, naturalist motifs do not only serve the purpose of increasing the extent of

plot's emotional appeal, but they are also being expected to enlighten readers on the true essence of their existential mode. In this paper, we will aim to substantiate the validity of an earlier articulated thesis at length, while exploring the emanations of literary naturalism in London's short story *To Build a Fire* and in the novel *The Call of the Wild*.

The close reading of London's 'Northern' short stories and novels, points out to the fact that naturalistic themes and motifs, contained in them, are being utilized not only for the purpose of exposing a particular ease, with which a formerly civilized individual can be reduced to a primeval savage, while facing the elements, but also for the purpose of revealing a variety of Western ethical conventions conceptually fallacious, since they do not correspond to the essence of their carriers' physiological functioning.

As Rossetti (2006) had put it: "Naturalism rebukes the primitive for his or her debasement. At the same time, however, it necessarily posits a privileged class and confirms that class's elite status" (5).

The soundness of this suggestion can be explored within the context of a following quote from *To Build a Fire*: "As he [traveler] turned to go on, he spat speculatively. There was a sharp, explosive crackle that startled him. He spat again. And again, in the air, before it could fall to the snow, the spittle crackled" (*The World of Jack London*). Apparently, the author had made a deliberate point in drawing readers' attention to purely physiological process of spitting.

Nevertheless, given story's overall context, the fact that the traveler has been spitting rather excessively, does not degrade him in readers' eyes, as <https://assignbuster.com/naturalism-in-jack-londons-to-build-a-fire-and-the-call-of-the-wild-research-paper/>

this context confirms the validity of London's conviction that whatever is natural, cannot be referred to as 'immoral' or 'anti-aesthetic', by definition.

In its turn, this explains why the apparent 'distastefulness' of London's preoccupation with expounding upon utterly graphic aspects of human existence, clearly visible in this particular story, did not result in lessening the extent of story's literary appeal.

The same can be said about the effects of utilization of naturalist motifs in London's novel *The Call of the Wild*, where author had gone a great length while describing physical violence's mechanical subtleties with great precision.

For example, in the scene where Buck receives his first 'submission beating', London appears to have deliberately strived to produce a heavy blow onto readers' sense of aesthetic appropriateness: "The man, shifting the club from right to left, coolly caught him [Buck] by the under jaw, at the same time wrenching downward and backward.

Buck described a complete circle in the air, and half of another, then crashed to the ground on his head and chest" (11). It is needless to mention, of course, that the way, in which London had gone about describing the scene of Buck's beating, can be best referred to as utterly graphic.

And yet, given the fact that London had never made a point in treating the subject of violence as 'thing in itself', while aiming to simply entertain intellectually marginalized readers, we cannot be referring to this particular

scene's clearly defined naturalism as being distasteful, in semantic sense of this word.

The earlier suggestion helps us to realize the essence of London's literary talent. Apparently, unlike what it used to be the case with many of his writing contemporaries; he was not only able to benefit from tackling the issue of violence in an intellectually honest manner, but also to show that, under no circumstances, should emanations of physical violence be regarded as ethically inappropriate, by definition, because in the natural environment, they do provide an additional momentum to the process of living organisms becoming ever-more complex – hence, violence's high morality.[1]

In its turn, this explains the phenomenon of why it were the author's particularly naturalistic literary pieces that appealed to intellectually sophisticated readers the most – whatever the irony it might sound.

In his article, Nash (1966) states: “ His [London's] readers had little difficulty seeing the moral for their own lives of Buck's reversion to the primitive. Significantly, London's *White Fang* (1906), in which a wolf becomes a family dog, never enjoyed the popularity of *The Call of the Wild*” (530). Thus, it will not be much of an exaggeration, on our part, to suggest that it is due to London naturalism's strongly defined philosophical sounding that even today; most readers consider it contextually appropriate.

Another reason why it is being the case is that London often exposes naturalistic themes and motifs in conjunction with his characters being on a great mission. For example, even though the author's description of the traveler's physical appearance in *To Build a Fire*, implies his lessened ability to conform

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to the conventions of Western civilized living: “The man’s red beard and mustache were likewise frosted...”

Also, the man was chewing tobacco, and the muzzle of ice held his lips so rigidly that he was unable to clear his chin when he expelled the juice” (The World of Jack London), it nevertheless does not imply his lessened ability to act as such living’s actual agent. The reason for this is simple – in *To Build a Fire*, the character of a traveler never loses its cool, right to the very end. In its turn, this subtly confirms the sheer objectiveness of a so-called ‘White man’s burden’ notion.

It is namely the fact that White people’s exposure to the hostile environment does not usually undermine their ability to face life’s challenges in a rational manner, which created objective preconditions for them to be given the mission of spreading the light of civilization throughout the world.[2] This is exactly the reason why in *To Build a Fire*, author’s utilization of naturalistic motifs invokes perceptual stoicism in readers.

As Gurian (1966) had rightly noted: “Jack London’s men fight, as heroes, against surrounding force... London depicts protagonists fighting to win in a causative naturalist universe” (112). By naturalistically juxtaposing the character of traveler against the hostile forces of nature, London provides readers with the insight into Faustian workings of White people’s psyche.

There can be very little doubt as to the fact that the strongly defined naturalism of many scenes in *The Call of the Wild*, serves essentially the same purpose. Given the fact that in this novel, dogs are being endowed with essentially human psychological traits, it comes as not a particular

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surprise that, while being exposed to the scenes of bloody rivalry between Buck and Spitz, readers gain a better understanding of what accounts for the essence of dynamics, within just about any human society.

Apparently, London believed that the representatives of *Homo Sapiens* species are nothing but primates, with the layer of their civilizational sophistication being only skin-deep.[3] Just as it is being the case with apes, people think of ensuring the propagation of their genes (through sexual mating) and of gaining a dominant position within social hierarchy, as such that represent their foremost priorities in life.

Therefore, the following naturalistic scene, where Buck and Spitz fight to the death, while trying to ensure their dominance, within the pack, can be best referred to as perfectly connotative of how people go about gaining social prominence, within a society to which they happened to belong: “ In vain Buck strove to sink his teeth in the neck of the big white dog.

Wherever his fangs struck for the softer flesh, they were countered by the fangs of Spitz. Fang clashed fang, and lips were cut and bleeding, but Buck could not penetrate his enemy's guard” (35).

Apparently, throughout the course of his life, London never ceased being aware of a simple fact that, on this earth, there is simply no enough place under the sun for all – only the smartest and the strongest enjoy dialectically predetermined existential superiority. This is exactly the reason why there are clearly defined Social-Darwinist[4] undertones to naturalist themes and motifs, contained in both: *The Call of the Wild* and *To Build a Fire*.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to think that these motifs are being essentially nihilistic. According to Auerbach (1995), the utterly naturalist way in which London's characters address life's challenges, is itself can be thought as the source of a new morality, based upon people's recognition of natural laws' full objectivity: " This [Darwinian] struggle... demands the dominance of one man over another; hence the origins of a master/slave dialectic... by working, [slave] becomes master over nature, and in doing so frees himself from nature as well as from himself" (59).

What it means that it is utterly inappropriate to refer to London's literary naturalism as an indication of the fact that he thought of ' primitiveness' and ' realness' as basically synonymous concepts.

Quite on the contrary – as the reading of *The Call of the Wild* and *To Build a Fire* points out to, characters' exposure to naturalistically defined primitivism, on the part of nature itself (in the short story) and on the part of gold-seeking brutes and their dogs (in the novel), cannot be discussed outside of how it helped these characters to realize the sheer extent of their perceptual nobleness.

We believe that the line of argumentation, deployed throughout paper's analytical part, confirms the validity of an initial thesis that the presence of naturalist motifs and themes in London's *The Call of the Wild* and *To Build a Fire*, should be thought of as having philosophical rather than purely instrumental purpose.

While never ceasing to treat readers in intellectually honest manner,

sublimated in his tendency to provide graphically detailed accounts of <https://assignbuster.com/naturalism-in-jack-londons-to-build-a-fire-and-the-call-of-the-wild-research-paper/>

characters' struggle with the hostile environment and with viciously-minded competitors for the same environmental niche; London strived to promote an idea that it is only those capable of understanding the full spectrum of 'survival of the fittest' concept's implications, who deserve to remain on the leading edge of biological evolution.

Given the fact that, due to being subjected to ideological oppression of political correctness, more and more men in Western countries now grow exceedingly feminized, it is very likely that in the future, London's literary naturalism is going to be increasingly referred to as such that contains clues as to very essence of masculine virtuousness.

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