

Behavioral changes in "white fang"



Jack London is known for using naturalism and brutality as themes in his novels; however, it is also common for him to use philosophical ideas to advance his plots. One example that effectively shows this is London's *White Fang*, which is significantly informed by Charles Darwin's theories of survival and competition. More specifically, this work centers on the study of Social Darwinism, which is a belief that "the process of natural selection acting on variations in the population would result in the survival of the best competitors and in continuing improvement in the population" ("Social Darwinism" 1). This theory is articulated within the changes in *White Fang*'s behavior in different environments. *White Fang* shows how one's behavior adapts through external influences and demonstrates the underlying presence of Social Darwinism.

The human characters have a significant impact on *White Fang*, prompting major changes in his behavior. One of these alterations occurs when he is forced into an unfamiliar and harsh environment. He must learn to survive with his new master, Beauty Smith, who is described as "a sadistic master who beats *White Fang* and starves him to make him fight harder" (Reesman 3). The neglect and abuse from Smith has an important impact on *White Fang*, since now he must learn new tactics for survival. Through this struggle, he learns to behave like a vicious beast in order to survive and protect himself from being killed. Eventually, this leads him to fight and often kill any dog that crosses his path. Virginia Crane explains how *White Fang* gets the name "The Fighting Wolf" by being "abused and exploited so harshly that he develops into a ferocious killer" (Crane 3). With Smith in control, *White Fang* learns and replicates Smith's immoral and malicious

traits. Smith treats him with such cruelty that he must adapt to the harsh environment in order to not be killed. London states that because White Fang is beaten and chained up for a long period of time, “[White Fang] now became the enemy of all things, and more ferocious than ever. To such an extent was he tormented, that he hated blindly and without the faintest spark of reason” (London 220). White Fang begins to manifest the hate that he receives from Smith, which is another reason he begins to behave as “The Fighting Wolf”. He now believes that violence is the only way to live, since he has never before been treated with love.

Another major change in White Fang occurs when Weedon Scott rescues him during a dangerous dog fight. From that moment on, White Fang’s life is completely different. Opposing the qualities of Beauty Smith, “ Scott represents a greater good because he chooses to make White Fang his responsibility, and he chooses knowing that he is taking on a killer” (Norvell 2). Being treated with the care and love that Scott provides is new to White Fang, so he must relearn how to behave and survive for life in this environment. Although this is a challenge for both of them, Scott doesn’t give up while training White Fang and helping him to earn a new reputation. White Fang’s change in behavior is tested and proven when he resists his natural instinct to kill other dogs when they begin to pick on him. Norvell explains that “ White Fang has learned not to attack dogs, and so he soaks up their abuse for Scott’s sake” (Norvell 2). Previously, White Fang only knew how to survive through fighting and killing to rule out competition. Scott treats White Fang with love and patience, so White Fang adapts to this behavior and changes his way of life. Instead of resorting to violence, White

Fang ignores the other dogs and behaves calmly, showing how Scott is an overall good influence on White Fang. Virginia Crane agrees, stating that “allegiance and affection for a man springs from this good treatment, and White Fang becomes ‘The Blessed Wolf’” (Crane 3). Because of Weedon Scott’s good nature, White Fang finally learns to love and care. This marks the end of his days as The Fighting Wolf, and the beginning of his new reputation as The Blessed Wolf.

White Fang’s behavior changes to ensure survival in each environment, suggesting the idea of Social Darwinism. London includes this particular philosophical idea because of White Fang’s two opposing behaviors and how his ability to easily adapt and survive proves that he is one of the stronger dogs in the idea of survival of the fittest. The use of Smith and Scott “enables Jack London to again examine behavioral adaptation via principles of Darwinian evolution. He shows how chance, nature, and external influences function as forces that shape all animals’ evolution” (Vermaas “White Fang” 1). Vermaas suggests that London’s use of White Fang’s adaptations and behaviors further demonstrates the idea of Social Darwinism. The external influences are Smith and Scott, who both play important roles in White Fang’s behavior. During these times in White Fang’s life, “they were his environment, these men, and they were molding the clay of him into a more ferocious thing than had been intended by Nature. Nevertheless, Nature had given him plasticity. Where many another animal would have died or had its spirit broken, he adjusted himself and lived, and at no expense of the spirit” (London 222). London describes how White Fang is strong and portrays

Social Darwinism due to how he easily adapts to environments that would cause weaker animals to die off.

During White Fang's time with Smith, White Fang is shaped into a brutal wolf due to the poor treatment he receives. White Fang quickly adjusts and lives this new life of violence, which would typically be a struggle for other dogs. Crane argues this point by reminding us how "repeatedly, [White Fang] is brought to the edge of extinction, only to recover by adapting to the laws that govern his own nature and the laws that structure his new environments" (Crane 4). Each environment has a different set of laws. London again articulates this idea through the laws of the Wild, and how "White Fang knew the law well: to oppress the weak and obey the strong" (London 187). By learning these new laws, he is able to modify his actions accordingly. Matthew Bruccoli believes that the "domestication of the wolf is complete when White Fang sires a litter of pups, thus proving that adaptability is the key to survival" (Bruccoli 1). The internal conflict and major change within White Fang is complete at the end of the novel when White Fang becomes accustomed to the domesticated lifestyle. He begins to act more like a house dog, rather than a wolf in the wild fighting to survive. White Fang shows how the theory of Social Darwinism will have an effect on one's behavior, since it will cause one to adapt to changes in environment while fighting for survival.

Through the influences of Scott and Smith and the ideas of Social Darwinism, White Fang provides evidence for one's behavioral adaptations. This idea is demonstrated within White Fang's adjustments to survive within the different environments. The ideas of Social Darwinism further explain White Fang's

major transformation in behavior through the different needs of survival. One will adapt to different influences and environmental surroundings over time in order to live and prosper.

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