

Ecological Views in The Call of the Wild

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Abstract

With the deterioration of the ecological environment and the further research on the ecosystem, the value of ecological environment has been increasingly recognized. The Call of the Wild is one of the masterpieces written by Jack London who has ecological consciousness. In the novel, readers can know Jack London's ecological view. In this novel it vividly presents readers the exploitation of the civilization to the nature through the detailed description of Buck's transformation from a dog to a wolf. The article explores the ecological view in The Call of the Wild from three different chapters: 1) discusses anthropocentrism including human's mistreatment, human's civilization bad effect and human's desperate situation; 2) analyzes ecological holism such as Buck's adaptability to the wildness, bright side relationship between Thornton and Buck and Buck's relationship with Wolf; 3) explores ideal approaches to ecological balance from three aspects, such as human's responsibility to nature, abandoning the logic of domination and returning to nature. Through studying, the article will make the readers have a good understanding of Jack London and his works, from the perspective of ecological view. The article will make the readers know Jack London's criticism on anthropocentrism and integral ecosystem which can effect each other and the approaches of ecosystem balance.

Keywords

Ecological view; anthropocentrism; ecological holism.

1. Introduction

Jack London is one of the greatest American novelists in the late nineteenth century and nearly twentieth century. Many of his works are very popular among readers both in America and abroad. London's most famous book is *The Call of the Wild* published in 1903. This novel blends his experiences in the Canadian wildness with his ideas about nature and the struggle for existence. This article, based on the previous studies, analyzes London's ecological idea filled in *The Call of the Wild* from the perspective of ecological view.

Moreover, *The Call of the Wild* is one of the masterpieces of naturalism written by Jack London who has ecological consciousness, which makes him famous. The studies on Jack London's works mainly concentrate on the themes, content and writing skills. Some critics also analyze the work from the perspective of naturalism and interpret the influence of environment and heredity on animals respectively. So, in China, critics have paid little attention to the ecological tendency in London's *The Call of the Wild*. In this novel it vividly presents readers the exploitation of the civilization to the nature through the analysis in detail of Buck's transformation from a dog to a wolf. So the research of this novel from ecological view is high-valuable, while concerning about the growing serious environmental problems, now in twenty-first century.

Labor Earle's book named *Jack London*, published in 1974, introduces that Jack London is one of the writers who are most successful and prolific in the early twentieth century. Jack London, whose

stories mainly come from his own experience, is especially famous for his animal tales and north tales. London's works have been kept alive and in print by the common readers not only in America but all over the world. In spite of the several decades of academic critics who make efforts to ignore him, his works still remains most widely translated and most widely read in America. To be sure, Jack London is an important western author; but more than this, he is also a great world author[1].

The original of ecocriticism comes from America and has come to strengthen itself as an apparent critical approach in lately years. In *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*[2], the author first uses the term "literary ecology". He states that the written works should pay attention to the relationship between the human beings and other species in the literary work. Ecocriticism is the research of the relationship between the physical environment and literature. To put it simply, the study object of ecocriticism is the relationship between nature and culture. And also he declares that ecocriticism takes nature as foundation and regards ecology as its center, and he criticizes the concept of "people first, and conquer nature" and opposes anthropocentrism[3].

The Critical Response to Jack London[4], there being a stigma attached to Jack London within American literary circles because London, who comes from the uncultured class, lacks a conventional education, and also because he, who is an outspoken socialist, dares to criticize bourgeois society. As a consequence, the tendency to read London's works as autobiographies have kept London's status within the canon of American literature because it can constantly remind readers of London's racist ideas, seedy past, questionable origins, contradictory life-style, and lack of formal education. To explain London's works within American literary circles, the information is limited to those few biographies about London's life available to foreign readers. And therefore, foreign critics are inclined to de-emphasize the autobiographical aspect of London's works and to value more on London's purely literary accomplishments than American critics have.

In Bert Bender's book *Evolution and "the Sex Problem": American Narratives during the Eclipse of Darwinism*[5], he points out Jack London as a "truly ecological thinker" according to precise and full data and creative analysis of London's works. Scholar Bender concludes that London should be viewed as one of American literature's first and vital ecological writers, for his anticipation of the aspect of ecology that emerged late in the twentieth century. Scholar Bender's study on Jack London's ecological view is valuable and convincing because he traces Jack London's ecological view back to Charles Darwin, Thomas Malthus and Ernest Haeckel. In his concern about the contradiction between the limited resources on the earth and the world's increasing population, London is impacted by Malthus, as an evident from one of London's letters to his friend. In this letter, scholar Bender cites that London writes that the habitable earth is so large, and the size of it can not be increased by man[6].

In conclusion, different critics and researchers give different opinions. They analyze this novel from different angles. This article mainly focuses on the ecological view of the novel *The Call of the Wild* in three chapters. And it analyzes anthropocentrism, discusses ecological holism and then aims at approaching to ecological balance. The article criticizes anthropocentrism that makes bad effects on nature and ecosystem and hopes ecosystem balance. Besides, protecting the ecology is necessary and meaningful[7].

2. Anthropocentrism in The Call of the Wild

This chapter mainly explores anthropocentrism in this novel. Anthropocentrism has been posited by some environmentalists as the underlying reason why humanity dominates and sees the need to "develop" most of the Earth and as a root cause of the ecological crisis. In *The Call of the Wild*, Jack London discloses many anthropocentric deeds and expresses his criticism on them[8].

2.1 Human's Mistreatment to Buck and the Wild

In the novel *The Call of the Wild*, the dog protagonist Buck and the other sled-dogs are under cruel treatment of some of their masters. Obviously, London strongly criticizes these people's inhumane behavior.

In the beginning of the novel, although Buck is a valuable commodity, he is subject to extreme cruelty and neglect after his kidnapping, in the course of his move to the Yukon. The first instance occurs when the man to whom Manuel sells him twists the rope attached to his collar. "Buck struggled in a fury, his tongue lolling out of his mouth and his great chest panting futilely".¹ In the morning, four men enter and pick up the crate where Buck stays. Buck "stormed and raged at them through the bars," but "they only laughed and poked sticks at him, which he promptly assailed with his teeth till he realized that that was what they wanted".²

It is obvious that anthropocentrism is exposed here. For the sake of human beings' own benefit, the brutal dog-traders and dog-trainers do not scruple to torment and agonize Buck and get fun from it. Human beings are selfish, showing no sympathy to animals. They regard animals as "objects" to be dominated and controlled. Luckily, Buck gets lessons from these torments: a man with a club is a lawgiver and a master to be obeyed, though not necessarily conciliated. These lessons enable Buck to survive in the harsh primitive world.

Buck and the other dogs experience disastrous torment and a life without care and attention. Jack London here criticizes human beings' cruelty imposed upon the innocent animals. He believes that animals deserve some respect and equal treatment from human beings. London recognizes that animals do have rights and human beings should extend their moral standing to animals.

Though Jack London rarely mentions this detail in this novel, there are indeed documents and data showing that the ecosystem in the Yukon area is badly destroyed:

After the gold rush began, the valleys, mountains, and frigid expanses of the Yukon Territory was littered with the bones of horses and dogs that had been driven mercilessly in man's greedy scramble for gold. In both endeavors, the hunts for furs and precious metals, the point was not just to make a living, but to make a killing.³

The Yukon gold rush of 1897-98 is part and parcel of Buck's story. The second sentence of the novel refers to the "Arctic darkness," where men look for "a yellow metal." By 1840, a few miners have come to the Yukon looking for gold. Gradually the search for metals begins to replace the hunt for furs in this area with rich natural resources. In 1886, a promising lode of gold is discovered in the Forty Mile Greek area where Buck rescued Thornton from drowning. Ten years later, thousands of miners come to the Yukon at that time, hoping to strike it rich.

London himself is also one of them. Although the gold rush does not make London rich, he witnesses that the great Klondike gold rush brings unrestrained exploitation of the wild and expansion of territory. Hordes of gold miners come to the originally peaceful and pure Klondike area in swarms. They dig wells and mines, recklessly destroying forests and over hunting animals. These explorers build factories and residences, but they also bring diseases to the native people. The gold rush leads to the wild cruelly misused by man at his most rapacious.

From the above paragraph readers can easily draw the conclusion that the relationship between man and the wild is undermined by the gold rushers and explorers. They are blind to their crazy exploitation and to the natural law. Buck's experiences and his final decision to join the wild become understandable because even though his returning to the wild is incredibly difficult, it is not as cruel as man's attempts to conquer the wild.

2.2 The Dark and Ugly Side of Human Civilization

Jack London discloses some dark and ugly side of human beings which is also manifestations of anthropocentrism. On the way of pursuing gold, greed and desire control human beings' mind and

body. Greed in psychology is an excessive desire to acquire or possess more than what one needs or deserves, especially with respect to material wealth. Throughout the whole novel, greed, to some extent, determines the lives of both men and animals.

She appealed to everybody and to everything, finally whipping her eyes and proceeding to cast out even articles of apparel that were imperative necessities. And in her zeal, when she had finished with her own, she attacked the belongings of her men and went through them like a tornado.⁴

Mercedes, the only female character in the novel, has a kind heart at the beginning, but greed finally makes her virtue vanish. She feels sympathy and cries for the dogs when they are in miserable conditions at the beginning. But then Mercedes does not cry and feel sympathy for the dogs any more, on the contrary, she cries when her clothes-bags are thrown out because the sled is too heavy for the dogs to pull. Mercedes becomes more and more capricious.

On the way of pursuing gold and desire, Mercedes' attitude to animals changes from kindness to torment. It indicates that greed controls her and smothers her virtue.

In all, it is people's greed for gold that puts the whole narrative in motion. Gold glitters. Throughout the novel, the greed for gold sends great hordes of people racing to the Yukon and by any means possible acquiring the great numbers of dogs needed to travel on the frozen terrain of the North. It is humans' greed for gold that subdues Buck with clubs and turns him into a slave laborer. Human's greed also greatly destroys ecosystem and deteriorates human mind, which is one of the concerns of ecocriticism.

2.3 Human's Desperate Situation Owing to Anthropocentrism

To control and conquer nature may bring humans temporary and opinionated happiness, but they will bear long-term mental sufferings because they lost their harmonious relationship with nature.

In *The Call of the Wild*, what is clearly shown is that men race with nature, and nature wins. Hal, Charles and Mercedes are three big losers in their battle with natural forces. They bring weapons with them to the Northland, attempting to be conquerors of nature. But their ambition is bound not to be realized from the beginning. They regard themselves competent and powerful, but in fact they are silly and naive, knowing nothing about the Northland wilderness or the life there.

Buck watched them apprehensively as they proceeded to take down the tent and load the sled. There was a great deal of effort about their manner, but no businesslike method. The tent was rolled into an awkward bundle three times as large as it should have been. The tin dishes were packed away unwashed.⁵

Out of their callowness and foolishness, they overestimate their competency. They are not willing to adopt the old-timers' advices about what luggage should be taken and how to break out sled. They also overestimate their power over nature.

Hal, Charles and Mercedes are actually conquerors who know nothing and are finally defeated. London actually anticipates Leopold in questioning the alleged domination over nature and often futile attempts made by arrogant men to conquer nature. The death of Hal, Charles and Mercedes in the icy river manifests the truth that nature is unconquerable.

From the above analysis, anthropocentrism is embodied in this novel. Anthropocentrism is an inclination to evaluate reality exclusively in terms of human values. Human only think themselves benefits. So they make god rush to satisfy their desire and maltreat Buck, other animals and the wild. Owing to human beings' unrestrained developing and anthropocentrism, it leads human beings to desperate situation and nature to be destroyed.

3. Ecological Holism in The Call of the Wild

This Chapter mainly discusses the ecological holism in the novel. Ecological holism thought means that human beings' benefits are not the only one as the world's highest interests. All the aspects are

equal in the world. London describes that the world is integral. Animals, nature and human beings cannot be separated and cannot live without others.

3.1 Buck's Adaptability to the Wildness

Buck is born in the sun-kissed Santa Clara Valley, on Judge Miller's property. In the first four years, he has good times with the whole family and lives a dignified life, and his humanity develops completely. Then he is stolen and sold as a sled dog. In the cruel environment and laws of club and fang, he has changed a lot. His humanity disappears and his wildness has emerged. After some period of toil in the nasty wilderness, Buck is changing spiritually.

Buck wanted it. He wanted it because it was his nature, because he had been gripped tight by that nameless, incomprehensible pride of the trail and trace. Likewise it was his pride that made him fear Buck as a possible lead-dog. And this was Buck's pride, too. 6

He grows more mature with the fear of the wild thing and is also aggressive to the claim of the leadership. Most of Buck's follow dogs from the sun-kissed Southland die on the trail under the toil, the frost and the starvation. But Buck is an exception.

He changes and his muscles turn as hard as iron, which makes him match the husky in strength, savagery, and cunning. Then he becomes a powerful and masterful dog. The pursuit of power ranks one of the primitive desires. There is nothing more normal for Buck to strive for the dominance. Sooner or later, it is inevitable that the deadly clash for leadership should approach. By the token, Buck's wildness emerges and overlaps him.

It is a primitive animal world, a bloody battlefield. There is no fair play, and the only rule is massacring and thirst for blood. Buck is an animal, a wild thing living in the forest. Besides, Buck can be adaptable to the wild due to his dog's nature. Buck's wildness emerges and overlaps him. And he becomes a powerful and masterful dog.

3.2 The Bright Side of Relationship between Thornton and Buck

A harmonious relationship should be built on mutual caring and understanding. As far as Jack London concerned, the relationship between Buck and John Thornton stands typically for an integrated world.

But John Thornton gives his mercy for Buck. "Moisture came into his eyes, as the whipping continued; so he arose and walked irresolutely up and down."⁷ And the moment hearing Thornton's command "mush", Buck puts himself forward and tightens the halters with great physical energy. Buck only listens to Thornton and respects him. Thornton regards Buck as his son. And Buck also gives his response with allegiance and contribution to Thornton's caring and attention.

"the muscles writhing and knotting like live things under the fur. His chest was to the ground, his head forward and down, while his feet were flying like mad."⁸ For Buck, it is lucky to come across John Thornton. It is John Thornton who saves Buck's life. When all the dogs are worn out on the track under the torture of Hal's family, the terrible master still forces them move hard ahead with clubs without any caring and sympathy for them.

From the above descriptions, readers could get that the relationship between Buck and Thornton is not deemed as master and slave any longer, on account of the mutual love and comprehension between them. Thornton regards Buck as his son. And Buck also gives his response with allegiance and contribution to Thornton's caring and attention. Buck only obeys Thornton's commands. He is loyal only to Thornton.

3.3 Buck's Relationship with Wolf

Humans historically have had a complex and varied viewpoint of wolves. In many parts of the world, wolves are respected and revered, while in others they are feared and held in distaste. Many languages have given names (almost universally masculine) meaning "wolf".

The dogs' wolflike fury shines through, but their wolfish independence as followers and killers of their own game has been lost. They seem confused about their own identity, as if they are doomed permanently to a state of transition between being dogs and being wolves, unable to reconcile the tame and wild elements within. 9

Many Chinese proverbs use wolves as a description towards any ill-willed person with a hidden agenda like Wolf-hearted which could also connote to the impossibility of taming bad people; dog lungs refers to an ungrateful person who later betrays someone who previously helps them.

The idea of the wolf assumes a symbolic function in the novel. The wolf embodies that basic, ancient element from which creatures have sprung. It is the true "self," independent of civilization. In the dog, the wolf is that quintessential being that is bargained away when the dog trades its self-sufficiency for a slavish life with men.

As it is, wolf is the undomesticated dog, and dog is the domesticated wolf, that is to say, it remains possible for the atavism of Buck. Buck can get along well with wolf and can not exist alone. They are connected and integral.

To sum up, ecological holism thought means that human beings' benefits are not the only one as the world's highest interests. All the aspects are equal in the world. And the world is integral. Animals, nature and human beings cannot be separated and cannot live without others. Animals can be adaptable to the wilderness and can have good relationship between them. Besides, human beings can treat animals and nature equally. If not, the world will be in a bad situation. So please cherish what human beings have and respect nature and animals.

4. The Ideal Approaches to Ecological Balance in The Call of the Wild

This chapter mainly analyses the ideal approaches to ecological balance. *The Call of the Wild* addresses the issues of threat on nature by human beings. Therefore, facing these destructive situations as described and indicated in this novella, London meditates on the solutions to this crisis. He suggests that humans should redefine and recreate human-nature relationship. Man should be responsible to nature by protecting wilderness, restricting their development and simplifying their material life. In the same time, London meditates human-nature relationship. He views man from another aspect and calls humans' return to nature in order to create an ideal human-nature relationship.

4.1 Human's Responsibility to Nature

As a part of the society, humans have their corresponding social responsibilities. As a part of the nature, mankind has their corresponding natural or ecological responsibilities. Today's ecological crisis is caused by humans and they have to take responsibilities. They should help relieve ecological crisis and regain ecological balance to make sure that all species can exist safely and healthily.

Wilderness is the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover our true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives. Most of all, it is the ultimate landscape of authenticity. 10

Nature has an almost sacramental value: it holds out the promise of a renewed, authentic relation of humanity and the earth, a post-Christian covenant; founds a space of purity, and an attitude of reverence and humanity.

There are many different kinds of nature in London's works but wilderness in the northland is the most representative one. It is extremely cold and dangerous. It is not Eden Garden. However, London finds its shocking beauty which is completely different from the civilized world. Wilderness in the north is pure compared with dirty corruption in the civilized world.

Therefore, in this kind of environment, human's souls can be purified. So it is obvious that human should protect wilderness and nature. Mankind has their corresponding natural or ecological responsibilities.

4.2 Abandoning the Logic of Domination

Ecological harmony stresses the integrity of the whole ecosystem. In Jack London's animal novels, nature is represented by dogs at most of the time. So the human's domination of nature is actually the domination of dogs.

With these ignorant, self-indulgent, hypocritical and greedy masters, Buck lives a terrible life and at the same moment he bears the torment which seems to last forever with nobody to care and look after him. Under this situation, the human beings treat the animal as they are the master of the slaves[9].

People think that they can do anything no matter how badly to the dogs which are the representation of the animals. Consequently, Buck "felt confused that there was no depending upon these men and the women."¹¹ The human beings' bad attitude to the dogs causes that Buck refuses to comply with the rules made by the masters and does not work continually. Besides due to the domination of human beings', the ice in the north is broken and leads to many people and dogs die.

So here Jack London criticizes human beings' cruelty imposed on the animals and deterioration of civilization of his time. He is opposed of anthropocentric views on animals and nature.

Therefore, people should abandon the domination of nature and obey the rule of nature. Only human beings abandon their logic of domination, they can return to nature. Human beings are just one role on this planet and only a small part in the world. So people should get along well with other species and the nature.

4.3 Returning to Nature

In the beginning, London opposes Rousseau's ideal "to return to nature". He thinks it is a degeneration to solve problems with this method because he thinks it is a waste of civilization mechanism. Therefore, London places his dreams to mysterious and free nature and calls for a primitive wild power that can be in harmony with nature. He explores a way civilization belongs to, which is to do things according to natural rules and live in harmony with nature. *The Call of the Wild* is a novel that makes the idea "return to nature" directly as its theme. For London, to return to nature does not mean to escape from reality, but to get rid of the shackles of industrial civilization and scientific rationalism, to shake off the vulgar commercial spirit and to return to a simple and healthy state of living.

Wild and strong, Buck lives a simple and primitive life and emerges as an ideal hero of the wilderness. Buck lives freely and harmonious in nature. He likes to run with other animals in the forest.

Nature gives Buck a free and happy life. Buck's request to nature is simple. "He killed to eat, not from wantonness; but he preferred to eat what he killed himself."¹² Buck preys for himself and finds place to rest by himself. Life in the wilderness is just about living place and food. In Judge Miller's house, Buck regards big house as his territory. It is like a kingdom. However, he now lives in nature and belongs to nature. To return to nature and build a harmonious relationship with nature is exactly London longing for and so should humans.

To sum up, to maintain ecological balance needs human beings' contributions. As a part of the nature, mankind has their corresponding natural or ecological responsibilities. Human beings should abandon their logic of domination and treat the world equally. The world has many roles, and mankind is just one of them. Besides, people should return to nature and build a harmonious relationship with nature.

5. Conclusion

The Call of the Wild is an outstanding work among Jack London's writing as well as one of the greatest novels in American literature, which has reached a high place.

This article studies the ecological view in The Call of the Wild from knowing the anthropocentrism, through which the author wants to explore that human beings has done harm to the nature and destroyed the ecosystem. Ecological holism is that the world is integral and cannot be separated, such

as Buck's adaptability to the wild, Buck's good relation with Thornton and Wolf. So, human beings should protect the nature and ecosystem. To keep ecological balance man needs contribution of human beings who should abandon their domination and return to nature.

To sum up, the ecological idea is employed to reinterpret the human's concept of survival and standard of conduct, especially the spiritual level of man's inner world. The article criticizes anthropocentrism that makes bad effects on nature and ecosystem and hopes ecosystem balance. Besides, protecting the ecology is necessary and meaningful[10].

The Call of the Wild evidently demonstrates the ecological significance. The study could be contributed a lot in the process. And this article lays the foundation for the study of ecological view.

Notes

1. Jack London. The Call of the Wild (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1994) 5.
2. Ibid., p.6.
3. Ibid., p.26.
4. Ibid., p.38.
5. Ibid., p.35.
6. Ibid., pp.40-41.
7. Ibid., p.45.
8. Ibid., p.56.
9. Ibid., p.59.
10. Ibid., p.64.
11. Ibid., p.62.
12. Ibid., p.71.

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