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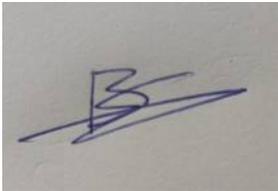
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Out of the Wild:

A Dialectical Analysis of Jack London's *White Fang*

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Abstract

Jack London's name is usually associated with *The Call of the Wild*, the atavistic tale of a domesticated dog who gradually regains his wolfish instincts. Its companion novel and thematic mirror, *White Fang*, is often regarded as the less significant of the two, veiled under the well-loved tale of a wolf that must endure hardships to be able to devote himself to his loving master. Thus, there is a dialectic at work between the two novels; *The Call of the Wild* postulates a progression from civilisation towards wildness, which is opposed in *White Fang*.

This dialectic is not limited to the relation of the companion novels but, I argue, is present within *White Fang* as well. Besides the novel's traditional *Bildungsroman* reading advocating social cultivation, this meta-dialectic enables a counter interpretation that promotes a reconnection with wildness. To situate both readings, I explore Jean-Jacques Rousseau's ideas of human cultivation through a Social Contract, along with Henry David Thoreau's and Sigmund Freud's views on the merits of a (partial) return to nature. After establishing these discourses, I apply my own analysis using a Hegelian thesis-antithesis-synthesis dialectic. I posit *White Fang*'s reading as a *Bildungsroman* as the normative thesis, opposed by an allegorical interpretation of social atavism as its antithesis. In the synthesis, I make a claim for both readings' feasibility, their wider implications, and, finally, their temporary unification.

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1. Introduction

Jack London, born John Griffith Chaney, was a novelist, journalist, and social activist. In his rather short life – London died at the age of forty – he transformed from a rugged individualist into a fully-fledged socialist. In *War of the Classes* (1905), London notes how he, as a young man, “sang the paean of the strong with all [his] heart” —he “looked on the world and called it good, every bit of it” (93). He was undoubtedly “proud to be one of Nature's strong-armed noblemen” (93) and, if he had not travelled to the “congested labor centres of the East” (95), London might well have roared “through life without end like one of Nietzsche’s *blond-beasts*, lustfully roving and conquering by sheer superiority and strength” (94).

London came to the realisation that his optimism was a direct result from his health and strength as a young man, as those who had grown old and weak were “cast adrift by their masters like so many old horses” (94-95). Because London feared his strength might one day falter likewise, he promised himself to not work another day in such menial fashion (95-96). Instead, he committed himself to what would be a significant oeuvre of politically charged novels and short stories.

What is particularly interesting about *War of the Classes* is that it was published in 1905, precisely in between the two novels – *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906) – for which London became world famous. In this regard, it is plausible to attribute London’s lust for life – which propelled him into the Klondike amidst the Gold Rush – to the first of the two novels, *The Call of the Wild*. This novel’s protagonist, Buck, recovers his instinct as he regresses from a “sated aristocrat” (*Call* 5) into a “thing that preyed [...] surviving triumphantly in a hostile environment where only the strong survived” (92). London’s youthful exuberance, along with his individualist predisposition to Social Darwinism, has been the foundation of reading the novel as a social commentary. Raymond Benoit, for instance, argues *The Call of*

the Wild is an allegory for the over-civilisation of society, which “traded the celestial undulations of celestial music, as Thoreau stated, for factory bells” (246).

Whereas this rather apparent social atavism drove *The Call of the Wild* to become the main subject for critical analysis, *White Fang* was tossed aside, even though, as its companion novel, it serves as a direct thematic opposite. Not only has *White Fang* been dismissed as the less interesting of the two – its social commentary is not as obvious as with *The Call of the Wild* – its seemingly happy ending, along with the fact that the protagonist is followed from birth to old age – but not death – has led to the novel’s characterisation as a *Bildungsroman* for children (Danielsson 125).

Additionally, *White Fang* was published in 1906, a year after *The War of the Classes* – London’s evident turn to socialism, which presupposed his ideas about the betterment of society. Although the novel is directly linked to *The Call of the Wild*, this chronological perspective allows an analysis in line with London’s political disposition regarding the progression of civilisation. Nonetheless, there are critics who oppose this kind of reading, such as S.K. Robisch, who proposes *White Fang*’s ending is not the happy final stage of a *Bildungsroman*, but rather tragic, as it underlines the wild animal’s inevitable perishing under domestication (320).

Considering the novels’ narratives are diametrically opposed, there is an overarching dialectic present that is formed by the conflicting values attributed to both wildness and civilisation. *The Call of the Wild* posits civilisation as a negatively loaded starting point out of which Buck must escape to reclaim his instincts in a positively loaded wildness, whereas in *White Fang*, this transformation, as well as the value attached to both wildness and civilisation, are effectively reversed. Furthermore, there is also a dialectic present *within* both novels. Besides *White Fang*’s apparent reading as a novel of cultivation, Robisch’s insistence on the essential virtues inherent in wildness (321) thus offers an opposite reading.

As my thesis will revolve around the dialectic present *within White Fang*, I will first situate its dichotomous discourses against the multitude of philosophical concepts that both preceded and developed during London's time of writing, as well as explore American nature writing, relevant due to its proximity – both geographically and chronologically – to London himself.

For the first discourse, which revolves around a traditional reading of *White Fang* as a *Bildungsroman*, I will look at Enlightenment thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who postulated the improvement of human civilisation through moral virtue. From this perspective, it will be interesting to read *White Fang* as a novel of (social) cultivation. As the second discourse relates to *White Fang*'s domestication as a symbol of figural death, I will consider Henry David Thoreau's and Sigmund Freud's ideas of the value of a (partial) return to nature. This discourse will be established through the idea that wildness is inherently affiliated with life, and that by both regulating and relegating nature man effectively inhibits his innate wildness.

London is prized as “a writer of unbounded energy who dovetailed one writing project with another in steady succession, never lacking ideas” (Williams 65). In this regard, approaching *White Fang*'s meaning as absolute, either as an advocate for social cultivation or social atavism, is irreverent towards both the multifaceted philosophical concepts of the time as to London himself. Thus, I will use the threefold manner of the Hegelian dialectic to approach *White Fang*'s meaning not as an absolute, but rather as a process of tension between two opposing readings. Doing so, I hope to address what such a dialectical reading of *White Fang* may eventually say about our understanding of the nature/culture dichotomy that concurred during London's time of writing.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this theoretical framework, I will first establish the two discursive motifs of social cultivation as well as man's discomfort in the growing institutionalisation of such a society. Additionally, I will connect these two motifs by setting up a discourse of dialectics, through which I will organise the structure of my own reading of *White Fang*.

Before society was first established, man lived in what Enlightenment philosophers conceived as a "state of nature". This hypothesised condition, still free from societal constraints, can be seen as a modern discourse situated to presuppose modern man. In this regard, the state of nature has played an important role through modernity, as it establishes the dichotomy between man in nature and man as a subject of society. One of the Enlightenment's first philosophers, Thomas Hobbes, holds that man's natural freedom in a state of nature is effectively subdued as a result of their perpetual war over the scarcity of goods; their lives were "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short" (*Leviathan* 87-89). Hobbes famously attributed Plautus's quote to this pre-civilised man: "homo homini lupus est" —man is like a wolf to his fellow man (*De Cive* 23).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, however, did envision men to be free and equal in a state of nature, where they "lived in the present, experiencing only spontaneous drives" (Dunn 5) without the agreed-upon possession of property (Rousseau 160). Yet the first sentence of Rousseau's *The Social Contract* reads that while "Man was born free", everywhere he is in chains (156). As a result, Rousseau concluded that "if modern individuals appeared corrupt, unequal and enslaved, it is society – not human nature – that is to blame" (Dunn 6).

Rousseau thus blames the institutions in place – such as hereditary monarchies – for the enslavement of man (133). But how did these excluding institutions come to be? Men, still in a state of nature, unconsciously developed their thought capacity as they tried to survive, while "some happy accident made them acquainted with fire [...] they discovered the method of

preserving this element, then that of reproducing it” (115). In short, the simple reiteration of trying to stay alive “naturally engendered in the mind of man the idea of certain relations” that eventually effectuated his superiority over other animals (115). As a result, man settled and established families, leading to a “conjugal and paternal love” that Rousseau saw as “the sweetest sentiments the human species is acquainted with” (116-117).

This period can be characterised as a “long golden age that saw the appearance of family units and patriarchal authority but not yet of private property” (Dunn 6). To Rousseau, corruption arose when “The first man, who after enclosing a piece of ground, took it into his head to say, *this is mine*, and found people simple enough to believe him” (113). Thus, civil society was founded (113). The competition over property led to economic inequality, which, in turn, led people “to distinguish themselves and assert their own superiority” over their neighbours (Dunn 7). While one “tried to satisfy one’s ego”, one effectively robbed oneself of “authenticity and equality – as well as of the compassion one had felt for others in the state of nature” (7).

Moreover, although “no man has any natural authority over his fellow men” (Rousseau 158), the economic inequality that resulted out of private property *exactly* propagated this: “The usurpations of the rich, the pillagings of the poor, the unbridled passions of all [...] rendered men avaricious, wicked and ambitious” (123). Because only the rich risked their property in such a state of war (124), they offered to establish a fair and sovereign power. Most men were “uncultured and easily seduced” and “gladly offered their necks to the yoke, thinking they were securing their liberty” (125). Instead, the rich fixed the laws of property and, to the “the benefit of a few ambitious individuals” effectively subjected the masses to “perpetual labor, servitude, and misery” (125).

Although Rousseau remains, like Hobbes, a contractualist – “we are bound to obey none but lawful authorities” (158) – he disregards this unfair rendition of the Social Contract;

“To renounce one’s liberty” in such a way is akin to “renounce one’s essence as a human being” (159). Nevertheless, Rousseau is of the opinion that a Social Contract is necessary for the progression of mankind; the problem is not the act of being governed, but *how* this government is practiced. In this regard, a real act of sovereignty is “not an agreement between a superior and an inferior, but an agreement of the collective body with each of its members” (175).

At the foundation of Rousseau’s quest towards “a more rational, social, and moral Eden” lies his belief in human ‘perfectibility’ (Dunn 6). Whereas “nature is in no way in our control” and “we are born stupid” (Rousseau *Emile, or On Education* 38), Rousseau, and other humanists with him, regarded man’s “vast rational and ethical potential” (Dunn 6) to endow him, through education, with the judgment he needed —“Everything we do not have at our birth and which we need when we are grown is given us by education” (Rousseau *Emile, or On Education* 38). Thus, following this discourse, *White Fang* can be read as a *Bildungsroman*. Wilhelm Dilthey, who popularised the term that Karl Morgenstern introduced in the early 1820s, regarded the type of novel as “the poetic expression of the Enlightenment concept of *Bildung*” (Boes 232). Therefore, the *Bildungsroman* is seen as the perfect vehicle to accompany both Enlightenment as well as eighteenth and nineteenth century philosophies concerning this ‘human perfectibility’.

The *Bildungsroman* has been subject to heavy redefinition over the years. For instance, Franco Moretti argues that whereas the classical *Bildungsroman* plot posits happiness as the highest value to the impairment or dissolution of freedom, Stendhal followed a radically opposite course for his definition (Moretti 8). While this taxonomy is interesting, it does not allow for easy and consistent application. In this regard, I find Mikhail Bakhtin’s definition, as “the image of *man in the process of becoming*” (19) particularly useful. However, his definition gives rise to two implications. Because *man* is the subject in the *Bildungsroman*, *White Fang* is likely be read as an allegory. Still, as Todd Kontje notes that the *Bildungsroman* “might be

described as a process of teleological and organic growth, in the manner of a seed that develops into a mature plant according to inherent genetic principles” (1-2), the wolf is as much an organism as the man.

Nonetheless, White Fang is characterised as a hero who “emerges along with the world and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself” (Bakhtin 23). As the original focus of Rousseau’s ‘perfectibility’ of the human has influenced reading *White Fang* as an allegory, the wolf represents the transition from one epoch to the other (23). This transition, from wildness to civilisation, is accomplished within White Fang himself through the hardships he is subjected to.

The *Bildungsheld*’s conflict with society inevitably results in what Marc Redfield calls the “integration of a particular ‘I’ into the general subjectivity of a community, and thus, finally, into the universal subjectivity of humanity” (38). White Fang, too, increasingly melds into this ‘general subjectivity’ that is the growing civility of society. Considering Rousseau’s idea of cultivation at the hand of rationality, *White Fang* serves as a vehicle for the human as he represents his structural deviation from the wild and subsequent inauguration into regulated civilisation.

Although the Enlightenment morale that Rousseau advocated has led to more civil rights, it also brought about a greater degree of institutionalisation and established rationalism as a new dogma. Sociologist Max Weber famously attributed Friedrich Schiller’s phrase “Entzauberung der Welt” (‘disenchantment of the world’) to Enlightenment’s abandonment of myth and religion (42). Meaning – inherently framed against concepts such as “substance and quality, activity and suffering, being and existence” – was immeasurable by scientific standards; Enlightenment effectively discarded meaning on its way to modern science (Horkheimer & Adorno 3). However, the increasing complexity of society and the systematic

eradication of nature in humanity led counter-discourses to emerge during the nineteenth century that advocated a reconnection with nature.

One of these counter-discourses, native to London's America, was the philosophical current of "Transcendentalism". Like Rousseau, the European settlers had grown weary of the aristocratic monarchies that perpetuated their own power. The New World offered them a blank slate, but also confronted them with an unparalleled "wildness of nature" that threatened not only "their physical safety but also their spiritual well-being" (Manning 25). As humans can be seen to "believe themselves free of fear when there is no longer anything unknown" (Adorno & Horkheimer 11), the settlers turned the wilderness' fringes into settlements —"interest in nature turned exploitative" (Manning 25).

Even though their descendants adopted a "more appreciative view of nature based on a romantic nostalgia" near the end of the nineteenth century, much of their country's wild had already been consumed (Manning 25). As Transcendentalism disapproved of this exploitative behaviour, one of its co-founders, Henry David Thoreau, advocated seeing wildness not only as the "preservation of the world" and the "raw material of life", but also as a space of freedom where the individual could freely express himself (*Walking* 75;76). To Thoreau, "the highest that we can attain is not Knowledge, but Sympathy with Intelligence" (86). His hopes do not lie in a nature that is subdued and controlled – "not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities" – but "in the impervious and quaking swamps" (76).

Because of the growing institutionalisation of society, a life outside of its systems became increasingly harder. Thoreau notes that as "all men are not equally fit subjects for civilization; and because the majority, like dogs and sheep, are tame by inherited disposition, this is no reason why the others should have their natures broken that they may be reduced to the same level" (83). Although Thoreau does not entirely disregard rationalism, as it is in our

nature to investigate and learn, he does assert that “we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable” as “we can never have enough of nature” (*Walden* 258).

Thoreau figures as a hinge between Rousseau and Sigmund Freud, as the latter expanded on Thoreau’s discourse in his *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), encouraging the resuscitation of a nature abandoned long ago. Freud notes there are three sources of human suffering at the heart of our existence, namely, “the superior force of nature, the disposition to decay of our bodies, and the inadequacy of our methods of regulating human relations in the family, the community, and the state” (34).

As for the first two, and in direct opposition to those noble efforts of Enlightenment, Freud observes that while “man has become a god by means of artificial limbs”, he shall never fully control nature (41). Because man’s body is an organism – “itself a part of nature” – he shall have “to submit to the inevitable” (34). This inevitability is not necessarily loaded negatively, though, as Thoreau states that because we are not produced out of a vacuum but out of nature itself, we simply “need the tonic of wildness” (*Walden* 290). Regarding the third source of suffering, Freud indicates that we prefer to disregard it, as “we cannot see why the systems we have ourselves created should not rather ensure protection and well-being for us all” (34).

These systems have, however, been unsuccessful as a safeguard against suffering, as both the unconquerable nature and our own mental constitution will always inhibit full control (34-35). As a result, Freud offers an epiphany: “our so-called civilization itself is to blame for a great part of our misery, and we should be much happier if we were to give it up and go back to primitive conditions” (35). Freud, too, observes man’s dominion over nature, but to him, we are beginning to perceive that all of man’s conquests – be it over nature, time, or space – has not increased his comfort nor delights, nor has it made him happier (36). On the contrary, modern society actually constrains natural emotion: “it is impossible to ignore the extent to

which civilization is built up on renunciation of instinctual gratifications, the degree to which the existence of civilization presupposes the non-gratification [...] of powerful instinctual urgencies” (49). In this regard, *White Fang*’s is only able to satisfy these urgencies before his first encounter with man.

White Fang is situated in an interesting dialectical ebb and flow between the merits of civilisation, represented by an Enlightened ideal of cultivating society, and the integrity of nature, bound to life through wildness (Thoreau, *Walking* 76). To explore both discourses, I will apply a Hegelian dialectic. Following that “the nature of everything involves internal opposition or contradiction”, Hegel was of the opinion that in order to know something, we must first look beyond the apparent and see the thing which is not (Almagor 26). In this regard, the dialectical approach “emphasizes the negation of existing states, contradictions, and conflicts” (Almagor 26) as a necessity for a coalescence between two extremes. These opposing forces consists out of a thesis and an antithesis, which are brought together in a synthesis. For my analysis, the thesis will revolve around the traditional reading of *White Fang* as a *Bildungsroman*, the antithesis will assert a conflicting reading of *White Fang* as a novel that advocates social atavism, and the synthesis will expose both their limitations as well as (temporarily) unite them.

3. Thesis

White Fang is typically considered a fable, a moralistic story told through an animal protagonist (Cheshire 5). Not only is this genre easily accessible to children, it simplifies characterisation and effectively allows London to convey his message – White Fang’s *Bildung* as a symbol for mankind’s progressive journey out of the wild and into civilisation – without impeding himself by complex character creation (5). It is striking that *White Fang*, influenced by two predominantly humanist and anthropocentric genres – the fable and the *Bildungsroman* – features a nonhuman protagonist. Nevertheless, Brandt notes that, by using a nonhuman lead in *White Fang* London is able “to establish an imaginative space” in which he can dramatize “a positive condition of existential primitivism exclusively centred on physical reality, and provide an appealing respite from the uniquely human discontinuities of modern life” (43).

As a *Bildungsroman* is essentially a novel of education, I will be looking at White Fang’s four main states of being, respectively the state of nature as well as his encounter with his three different masters: Grey Beaver, Beauty Smith and Weedon Scott. From this perspective, the narrative’s starting point revolves around White Fang’s conception in the wild, which cold Alaskan setting is described as “the masterful and incommunicable wisdom of eternity laughing at the futility of life and the effort of life” (*White* 3). However, as there is always “life, abroad in the land and defiant” (3), London reveals a Darwinian stance regarding an organism’s need to adapt. In this regard, Jonathan Berliner argues that to London, “the results of social change are registered in individual human subjects in a physical, even biological manner” (59).

Whereas Rousseau envisioned the state of nature as a place where men felt “a harmony with the world” (Dunn 6), London sees it “as a place wherein ranged a multitude of appetites, pursuing and being pursued, hunting and being hunted, eating and being eaten, all in blindness and confusion, with violence and disorder, a chaos of gluttony and slaughter, ruled over by

chance, merciless, planless, endless” (*White* 76). Although White Fang cannot control the world in manlike fashion, his adaptability is contained in the knowledge that allows him to adhere to the Darwinian law of “EAT OR BE EATEN” (71). This knowledge, although seemingly unlike Rousseau’s notion of man – whose intellect had “pointed out to him the precautions most essential to his safety” (115) – is similar to White Fang’s knowledge, as he, too, uses his faculties to survive. For instance, he “never forgot the peck on the nose he had received from the first of that ilk” (*White* 71) and concluded “things were not always what they appeared to be” (68). In the end, White Fang’s instinctual drives allow him to survive his cubhood, knowing when to hide from a hawk, and, most importantly, knowing when to satiate his “lust to kill” (66).

In part three, White Fang experiences “his first glimpse of mankind” (79). Although every “instinct of his nature would have impelled him to dash wildly away, had there not suddenly and for the first time arisen in him another and counter instinct” (79). White Fang is “beaten down to movelessness by an overwhelming sense of his own weakness [...] Here was mastery and power, something far and away beyond him” (79-80). Grey Beaver, a native American and the first human White Fang’s encounters, marks the wolf’s domestication by stating “He is my dog” (*White* 81). The terminology London uses is striking, implying the only difference between a wolf and dog is his appropriation by a human, which also relates back to Rousseau’s idea of private property; the transition from human savageness to civility is framed against the possession of other animals – who had been their equal in a state of nature – to do their bidding. Additionally, London stresses White Fang’s Darwinian predisposition as White Fang “must hunt and defend himself against other predators as well as the rival Indian dogs that reject him due to his mixed dog-wolf heritage” (Brandt 55); they “perhaps sensed his wild-wood breed and instinctively felt for him the enmity that the domestic dog feels for the wolf” (*White* 100).

Brandt asserts that London highlights White Fang's "instinctual attraction to Gray Beaver and domesticity" (56) by stating "There was something in the fibre of White Fang's being that made this lordship a thing to be desired else he would not have come back from the Wild when he did to tender his allegiance" (*White* 119). London hints at the parallel evolution of man and wolf, as White Fang voluntarily accepts Rousseau's original "Social Contract" between him and Grey Beaver. In return for "Food and fire, protection and companionship", White Fang "guarded the god's property, defended his body, worked for him, and obeyed him" (119). White Fang's capability to adapt is highlighted as "the qualities in his kind that in the beginning made it possible for them to come in to the fires of men, were qualities capable of development" (99). Brandt underlines these qualities of development by stating that London "locates White Fang's proclivity toward sociality as an element of his evolved 'core' morality" (56). Whereas White Fang is servile to Grey Beaver, this relationship suggests a mutual evolutionary interest in each other, highlighting their parallel evolution out of the wild.

Although White Fang had primarily honed his instinctual survival skillset to thrive in the Northland, the "weaker, though persistent, drive" (56) to "tender his allegiance" (*White* 116) must be beaten into him before his dormant drive towards sociality can reach the surface (Brandt 56). In this regard, White Fang's transition from wolf to dog recapitulates the evolution from the savage man to a civilised man, as his "socialization emerges out of the interplay between inborn temperament and environmental inputs" (56). The 'contract' between White Fang and Grey Beaver primarily resembles Rousseau's "agreement between a superior and an inferior" (*Social* 175), nevertheless, it does secure within White Fang "the knowledge that the morrow would find him" (*White* 110).

Where the Native Americans still represented Rousseau's idea of a little society (117), the men that White Fang encounters at Fort Yukon have already accomplished a society based on "the law of property" (118), which further effectuates the inequality of Rousseau's initial

Social Contract. Beauty Smith, White Fang's second master, represents a step back in the wolf's *Bildung*. As Beauty Smith's "own inhumanity is the product of an asocial temperament and emotional abuse" (Brandt 57), he perpetuates this behaviour by abusing White Fang into "a more ferocious thing than had been intended by Nature" (*White* 152). In this regard, "the most powerful or the most wretched" regarded their power as the legitimisation of possession over (animal) others (Rousseau 123). Therefore, White Fang's "reign of hate" (*White* 178), which is activated by Smith's abuse, effectively intimates "how the competitiveness of human socioeconomic systems might also foster greed and violence – one of London's more oblique jabs at capitalism" (Brandt 57).

This one step back eventually leads to two steps forward, as White Fang is rescued by Weedon Scott, the "love master" (*White* 184). The Social Contract between White Fang and Grey Beaver – temporarily distorted through Beauty Smith's exploitative behaviour – is not only restored but has progressed. Nevertheless, this progression is the hardest yet, as this reformation "highlights the wolf-dog's deep ambivalence toward social reconditioning" of which much has to do with both White Fang's harsh puppyhood as well as his brutal maltreatment at the hand of Beauty Smith (Brandt 57). As such, White Fang must "ignore the urges and promptings of instinct and reason" (*White* 180).

Weedon Scott reaches "the roots of White Fang's nature" and touches, with kindness, "life potencies that had languished and well-nigh perished" (180). One of these potencies is *love*, which replaces the utilitarian *like* that White Fang had experienced under the tutelage of Grey Beaver. In this regard, the novel advocates a love ethic that supersedes socioeconomic boundaries, evoking "a more socialistic ethos in his depiction of the mutual support and love between White Fang and the Scott family" (Brandt 57). Brandt holds that *White Fang* is "illuminative of the social and instinctual adjustments endemic to modern human society" (58). Thus, whereas his relation with Grey Beaver was one of "an agreement between a superior and

an inferior”, his relationship with Weedon Scott realises Rousseau’s vision of a perfect social contract; “an agreement of the collective body with each of its members” (175), under which White Fang “flourished like a flower planted in good soil” (*White* 215). In the end, White Fang enjoys a “fat” and “happy” prosperity under the Californian sun, with “human kindness [...] like a sun shining upon him” (*White* 215). As Social Darwinists imagined such struggles as White Fang experiences to be “the dominant theme of social development” (Berliner 57), the wolf’s systematic progression into a life of mutual support and love with Weedon Scott completes Rousseau’s belief of an ideal Social Contract.

4. Antithesis

Following *White Fang*'s transition from a fearful life in the wild to one of love and communion in society, it is not surprising the novel has ordinarily been read as a *Bildungsroman*. However, as Thoreau and Rousseau countered the growing institutionalisation of society, so, too, can *White Fang* be read from an opposing point of view. From such a counter perspective, *White Fang*'s domestication – while endowing him with superficial comforts – has effectively led to the obliteration of the animal within. In this regard, *White Fang* does not symbolise man's trajectory out of the wild as a positive, but rather as a regression.

In this sense, there are essentially two extremes present in the novel; *White Fang* as a wild wolf as opposed to *White Fang* as a domesticated dog. As I have earlier established, man historically tried to abolish his natural fear of the dark by controlling his environment. As a result, Freud notes how in modern times a country is only seen as civilized when everything in it “can be helpful in exploiting the earth for man's benefit and in protecting him against nature” (42).

Yet, London notes how fear is the “legacy of the wild which no animal may escape” (*White* 60). Following this legacy, Freud argues that escaping nature is inevitable because we are created *from* it and will eventually die *through* it (41). This leads to an arbitrariness that can never be fully eliminated; “There was never any telling what might happen, for with live things events were somehow always happening differently” (*White* 49). Instead of retreating from what induces fear in *White Fang*, he is able to “forgot all about the unknown” (66) – which serves as “one of the chief elements that went into the making of fear” (61) – as he embraces his instinctual drives when engaged in battle with a ptarmigan, being “too busy and happy to know that he was happy” (66). Furthermore, London supports determinism as *White Fang*, during battle, was “justifying his existence, than which life can do no greater; for life achieves its summit when it does to the uttermost that which it was equipped to do” (66). This

passage is eerily like Buck's instinctual resurgence in *The Call of the Wild* – experiencing a “sheer ecstasy that marks the summit of life” (37). Both White Fang and Buck are, at these points in their narratives, “fully integrated into their wild environments” (Brandt 44). Even though they are submitted to pain, suffering and fear that are native to their Darwinian lives, their naturalistic struggle eventually “imbues their lives with qualitative meaning” (44).

In this regard, London is of the opinion that environment allows an organism to retrieve an “ontological foundation” (Berliner 66). This is also seen as the reason that the companion novels are set in the Arctic, as it “brings out the deepest racial passions in both man and beast” (66). Similarly, Freud notes how instinct is “at the bottom of all the relations of affection and love between human beings” (72). Therefore, White Fang's “nonhuman consciousness” essentially provides “a narrative conduit for an extended exploration of a mental-emotional condition that many Euro-Americans felt dislocated from – the state of being ‘in’ or feeling a genuine connection with ‘nature’” (Brandt 43).

As White Fang (still) represents wildness, the “strange dogs” (*White* 139) that enter from Yukon represent domesticity. Like mankind's exorcism of the unknown, these domesticated dogs rush for White Fang as “He was the wild, the unknown, the terrible, the ever-menacing” whereas they reshaped their instincts and learned to fear the wild they had “deserted and betrayed” (139). The “ancient feud” (140) that is revitalised once these Southern dogs see White Fang does, therefore, not necessarily embody dog versus wolf, but rather domesticity versus wildness.

However, Weedon Scott's rescue of White Fang veers the wolf's domestication towards a similar finality. This final domestication – or assimilation into human culture – covers two parts: White Fang's resignation to Weedon Scott and the subsequent fulfilment of his duty to society, *as a member of society*, by destroying the convicted Jim Hall.

Robisch notes it is easy “to forget or deny the plot of decline” (320) that unfolds as White Fang meets the loving Weedon Scott. Scott’s influence on White Fang eventuates the possibility of a “fairer life” (*White* 180), tempting the reader into believing “we may own a better world than the writer has shown us for the last hundred and fifty pages” (Robisch 320). While Scott’s intervention eventually leads to a life of luxury in Sierra Vista, what is easily forgot is that, “in saving White Fang’s physical life”, Scott has also broken that which “London has articulated as the wolf’s behavioral essence—its wildness, its spirit” (Robisch 321). Robisch does not necessarily object to White Fang’s dozing, which seems an innate characteristic to the wolf, but rather to his life as “a performance” (316). He notes the language that is used to describe White Fang’s last days – e.g. “sprawling” and “awkwardness” (*White* 230) – to be indicative of the destruction of White Fang’s genetical compulsion towards wildness (Robisch 316). The novel’s ending further highlights this natural (and subdued) compulsion, as a recovering White Fang is visited by “an unending pageant of Northland visions” (*White* 228), whether these amount to positive memories of his mother or negative memories of Beauty Smith, “he missed the snow without being aware of it” (216).

The final two chapters revolve around White Fang’s encounter with Jim Hall, who, although he “was innocent for the crime for which he was sentenced” (224), was convicted because “he had not been born right” (220). Hall is essentially an outcast who is designated as ‘inhuman’ by society – fittingly titled a “human beast” (222) – as he cannot conform to its rules. As Weedon Scott’s father – resting at the top of the social ladder as a judge – holds the “right to punish [...] something the gods reserved for themselves and denied to the lesser creatures under them” (92), *White Fang* indirectly critiques capitalist hierarchy.

Moreover, London’s predilection towards a “Turner-esque Social Darwinism, whereby environment and ancestry co-conspire to determine character” (Berliner 66) – as I have shown earlier, both White Fang and Buck earlier experienced such a state when “they were fully

integrated into their wild environments” (Brandt 44) – no longer finds expression in modern civilisation, which is demonstrated by Hall’s confrontation with White Fang. Hall’s humanity transforms into animality “the more harshly society handled him” (*White* 222), whereas White Fang is a beast who learns to adapt – from a Darwinian perspective – to the rules of society to survive. By destroying Hall, White Fang not only protects Weedon Scott, but also Scott’s father and mother, whose vocations of judge and homemaker represent the two pillars of modern civilisation: law and order (Robisch 312). However, even more strikingly, White Fang’s remaining wildness is weaponised by those at the top of society, such as the judge, to eradicate those who form a physical threat, such as Hall.

In a sense, it is White Fang who is the prisoner within the symbolic confines of civilisation – the house – whereas Jim Hall is the escapee, as “he dies a free man inside domestic human confines” (324). It is fitting then, that in such a society the “wild and dangerous animals have been exterminated”, whereas “the breeding of tamed and domesticated ones prospers” (Freud 42). Therefore, a ‘happy’ interpretation of the ending is, to Robisch, the novel’s greatest and most widespread misinterpretation, as it “denies the wolf as it posits an ‘opposite’ plotline to *The Call of the Wild* by way of assimilation” (309). Nonetheless, there is one constant all through the novel, which I will fittingly describe as ‘the call of the wild’. However, where Buck was able to give heed, White Fang is trapped by the ever-growing dependency on his human master; “It was a placing of his destiny in another’s hands, a shifting of the responsibilities of existence” (*White* 92). Still, the feeling remains: White Fang “must be away, free, on his own legs, touching no living thing” (135). Thoreau underlines our dislocation from nature by stating “We hug the earth, —how rarely we mount!” (*Walking* 90) and therefore urges us to “regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of nature, rather than a member of society” (59). Like the wildness was “still clinging to” White Fang (*White* 135), so does it cling to modern man, albeit hidden and dormant.

5. Synthesis

While I hope to have established *White Fang*'s viability both as a proponent for social cultivation as well as social atavism, it should be noted both readings are not without their faults.

Rousseau's ideal Social Contract – the “agreement of the collective body with each of its members” (175) – is not necessarily a given. *White Fang*'s relationship with Weedon Scott might have been founded on love, its inequality remains present. Besides the apparent “Down with you!” (*White* 199), Scott disallows *White Fang* of his basest animal instincts by restricting his free reign to hunt and kill. Particularly striking is *White Fang*'s encounter with the dogs surrounding the saloon at the cross-roads. While these dogs “made a practice of rushing out upon him”, *White Fang* had learned “the law that he must not fight” (213-214). However, after their owners “openly sicked” them on *White Fang*, Weedon Scott simply urges him to “Go to them, old fellow” and to “Eat them up” (214). Thus, this whole endeavour never constituted any free will; like those other dogs were “urged” (214) to attack *White Fang* by their masters, so is *White Fang*'s engagement in battle ultimately the choice of Weedon Scott.

Furthermore, there remains the hard-to-navigate boundary between wolf and human. Humans are not attributed with keen smell and sharp fangs to survive, instead, our evolutionary trait is our brain. Therefore, even though man's usage of tools set in motion the cogs of civilisation, they also endowed him with the much-needed protection “against the tyranny of natural forces” (Freud 39). Similarly, the line “life is always happy when it is expressing itself” (*White* 76) is not as easily applicable to the human as it is to the wolf. Brandt notes that *White Fang*'s fight with the ptarmigan – during which his “life achieves its summit” as “it does to the utter-most that which it was equipped to do” (*White* 66) – offers “a conspicuous contrast to modern humanity's crises of subjective meaning and feelings of alienation, loss, and fragmentation” (Brandt 46). Our purpose is not as clear as *White Fang*'s; whereas the

destruction of his wildness disrupts his “biological flow of energy” as well as his “organic vitality”, he is not burdened by “the human facility to self-reflectively conceptualize his being” (46). Thus, to solely describe *White Fang* as a novel that promotes social atavism would inadequately address the inconclusive relation between the civilised and the primal man.

Still, the most ambiguous writing surrounds the Jim Hall storyline. As I noted in “Antithesis,” *White Fang*, representing society, destroys Jim Hall, who represents wildness. Nevertheless, Brandt argues London is reluctant in fully embracing *White Fang*’s civilizing progress (59), as *White Fang* has only survived his encounter with Jim Hall because “he had come straight from the Wild, where the weak perish early and shelter is vouchsafed to none” (*White* 227-228). On the one hand, *White Fang*’s ending evokes a primitive form of Social Darwinism, as the civilised humans are “frail and flabby, and clutched life without any strength in their grip” compared to *White Fang* (228). On the other hand, a (partially) domesticated *White Fang* destroys another being that has fully embraced wildness. As a symbol for social cultivation, *White Fang*’s victory might hint at some civil values worth defending. Thus, this way of ending the novel is highly ambiguous at best.

Nonetheless, this overlap between thesis and antithesis proves more than disproves how “the essences of things include differing and opposed, often complementary elements or processes” (Almagor 27). On the one hand, *White Fang* displays the gradual amelioration of society through virtue and an ethic of love, but this is not to say nature does not hold any value. On the other hand, *White Fang* shows how the civilised man has lost touch with his instinct, but this is not to say society has exclusively caused him ruin. Therefore, the “real essence” lies in the unification – the synthesis – of these two sides (26).

London envisioned “the ultimate experience of aliveness” to reside in “the ability to enter an environment compatible with one’s ancestry” (Berliner 66). Although it is easy to imagine such an environment for a wild animal such as *White Fang*, it is harder to imagine one

for the cultivated human —what is it that precisely constitutes our environment? Considering humanity's increasing abstention from nature, I believe we no longer possess a 'natural' environment —nor did we during the beginning of the twentieth century. In this regard, *another* dialectic between nature and civilisation is present in modern civilisation. This dialectic expresses itself in the tension of the modern man, who feels a "discomfort" at being extracted from his natural habitat (Freud 34-35).

Yet, Freud notes this man is unable to go back to nature entirely, as his natural origin is occupied in the continuous act of killing him by having endowed him with an organic body (34). Thus, my synthesis proposes that whereas social cultivation has endowed man with more freedom and civil rights, his inner *blond-beast* "needs to be released from time to time" (Nietzsche 29) to at least reacquaint him with his natural environment. In this regard, the "real essence" (Almagor 26) of the nature/culture dichotomy lies in the unification of the two opposites, with both holding equal value.

As I have posited a Hegelian dialectic, this manner of resolving does not posit a final endpoint. From the reunion between nature and cultivation – the Dionysian and the Apollonian – may follow ten times as many new theses. For instance, it might be interesting to analyse *White Fang* from a point of view of the nonhuman, whose validity has been increasingly more recognised since man started reflecting on his anthropocentric behaviour. Thus, since London's time of writing, plenty of new, similar discourses that deserve academic attention have emerged. In this regard, I hope that, besides offering different readings of *White Fang*, my thesis may establish a bedrock on which new insights and readings can eventually be found.

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