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Determinism Three Ways: Reading Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*

Introduction

Naturalist scholar and writer Émile Zola encapsulated in five basic elements the key requirements of a naturalistic novel: “accuracy, noninvolvement, amorality, rejection of social taboos, and determinism” (Tavernier-Courbin 16). Jack London, while considered a minor American writer, saw the benefit of Zola’s criteria as a framework for portraying conceptually and aesthetically what lies at the core of the human experience. London’s novel, *The Call of the Wild*, is a testament of his strict abiding to these basic elements. In particular, his steadfast and complex attention to the last element, determinism, lies perhaps at the core of the enduring appeal of his novel. This element bears the impact and influence of theories and philosophical ideas that have shaped human understanding and perception.

This essay briefly explores the conceptual and philosophical foundations leading to deterministic tendencies in naturalism as affected by Darwinism, Nietzschean philosophy and Jungian psychoanalysis, and how they are reflected in London’s novel. It does not assume that the understanding and assumptions about determinism are exclusively driven by these ideas, but rather, that they are displayed in a concrete and intentional manner in London’s work. As such, this paper studies how these ideas and concepts, newly established in the late nineteenth century, may have been utilized by London to come to terms with the role of determinism in writing within the context of his own search for purpose and meaning.

The Darwinian Effect

In 1859, Charles Darwin published *On the Origins of Species* in which he postulated his theory of evolution. The impact of his theory spread from the scientific field into the literary realm where works were written in accordance with these new scientific facts. Naturalism, as a literary movement, emerged primarily, but not exclusively, from these efforts. Based on the Malthusian idea of an ever-growing population resulting in shortage of resources, Darwin concluded that there must be a “struggle for existence” (Darwin, *On the Origins* 130) among individual life forms. In that struggle, only the “best adapted;” (240) only the fittest survived. Darwin called this “natural selection,” (14) where individuals were considered as shaped through their parental heredity and put to the test by their environment, thereby weeding out the weakest and unfit.

Darwin postulated that species develop from other species over long periods of time. This contrasted with Christian beliefs and calculations, as it required the process of evolution to occur over millions of years. Darwin's theory could explain life mechanically, rendering Christian-based creationism irrelevant. Subsequently, God as the Creator could be doubted. Darwin's theory further contradicted accepted belief that science was nothing else but theology of nature, directed to a final and perfect end designed by God. The theory of evolution relied on laws of probability and chance, putting an end to all teleological or finalistic interpretations of the world. Then, in 1871, Darwin published *The Descent of Man*, postulating that human beings were descendants from apes. Man was neither “the work of a separate act of creation” (Darwin, *The Descent* 1514) nor distinguished by God to govern the Earth. And, if man was an animal, then morality was an invention along with the idea of God. Darwin's followers quickly assigned the theory of evolution to other branches of science and other subjects. In literature, its philosophical

implications were absorbed. As naturalism emerged, writers saw in Darwinian ideas an opportunity to present a viewpoint that was detached from moral guidelines and readily explored social taboos.

Darwinism saw man as having no control over his life, and therefore, helpless to change his fate. This determinism was further accentuated as naturalist writers began to emphasize man's physiological, primitive and impulsive nature rather than his moral or rational qualities. Concepts like free will and choice became absurd, and instead the role of nature in its indifference to man was highlighted. Coupled with an overarching realist frame, naturalist writers found the importance of accuracy, objectivity, and personal disengagement when writing.

Jack London embraced Darwinism wholly. In fact, it has been noted that when going to Klondike in 1897, he took a copy of *On the Origin of Species* with him. Scholar Carl Wilcox has pointed out that London's *The Call of the Wild* is comprised of key Darwinian deterministic aspects: sociological and biological determinism, the survival of the fittest, and belief in the primitive nature of man. *The Call of the Wild* relies heavily on Darwin's theory of evolution. In it, London tried to solve the dilemma of determinism and free will by using dogs as protagonists. The significance is clear: animals do not possess free will or have a moral choice like human beings do. His novel takes place primarily in Alaska, where the wilderness allows London to strip off the veneer of civilization so readers can recognize the "real" place where the law of nature can be seen as valid. Man and animals are reduced to their instincts to survive. Inherent in the plot is the Darwinian idea that species transform or evolve. London stretches this idea by exemplifying it in the way Buck changes from a tame, civilized dog to a wild wolf. Buck's life is an ethical retrogression; he lives a life of luxury in a southern civilized American city. He is then

caught and brought to Alaska to serve as a sled dog. Readers witness his submission to the code of violence and toil, a sort of de-initiation, forcing him to give up his sense of morality:

This first theft marked Buck as fit to survive in the hostile Northland environment. It marked his adaptability, his capacity to adjust himself to changing conditions... It marked further decay or going to pieces of his moral nature, a vain thing and a handicap in the ruthless struggle for existence. It was all well enough in the Southland, under the law of love and fellowship, to respect private property and personal feelings; but in the Northland, under the law of club and fang... he would fail to prosper (London 27-28)

Buck survives, and adapts to the wilderness in a long learning process. Only after he has acquired the basic skills for survival, he takes over the leadership of the pack. The battle with Spitz typifies this notion that Buck comes to believe in, that either Spitz or Buck have to die because only the fittest leader ought to survive. Buck kills Spitz, becoming the lead dog, and “the dominant primordial beast who had made his kill and found it good,” (London 51) indicating that killing is neither wrong nor bad, but rather a necessity in nature where only the strongest survive. When Francois and Perrault attempt to make Sol-leks the new team leader, Buck becomes indignant. After all, if survival of the fittest is the law of the land, he has earned that position. Buck believes “it was his by right. He had earned it, and would not be content with less” (London 53). Then, Buck is sold to inexperienced owners who do not know how to manage dogs, sleds or the journey they embark on. London stresses their clumsiness and error, making it clear that these human beings are unfit. So, not surprisingly, they die breaking through thin ice. There is complete lack of sympathy for them. In London's view they were unfit, therefore having no right to exist or usefulness in nature.

In the following chapters, Buck develops deep emotions for his master, John Thornton, who helps him regain his physical strength. But eventually, the last tie to civilization is broken when Thornton dies. Buck finds himself free to answer the “call of the wild,” which reminds him that “[he] was a killer, a thing that preyed, living on the things that lived, unaided, alone, by virtue of his own strength and prowess, surviving triumphantly in a hostile environment where only the strong survive” (London 118-119). He joins a pack of wolves and is finally transformed into the immortal “Ghost Dog” (London 133). This backward transformation into a wolf is clearly inspired by Darwin's concept that species transform into new species, and it is cleverly apparent with dogs, often seeing as domesticated wolves. Another interesting point in London's novel is the frequently mentioning of “awakening” or “remembering” of instincts. London returns repeatedly to the idea of heredity, one of the two basic evolutionary principles. The hero in this novel is caged in between heredity and environment, and as a result there is no place for morality or free will, only raw, primal survival while facing a deterministic world as established by the Darwinian theory of evolution.

Nietzsche's Influence

Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of the Superman (or *Übermensch*) was one of his most significant philosophical contributions.¹ Mentioned briefly in the prologue of his work, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, it remains one of his strongest statements about how he believed a human being should be and live. For Nietzsche, a superman was someone willing to risk all for the sake of the enhancement of humanity, someone who could establish his own values independent of others and able to influence the lives of those who lacked predetermined values and exhibited a herd instinct. A superman was to live a life of meaning, with purpose.

According to Nietzsche, a superman could affect history indefinitely, reentering the world through other people's minds, affecting their thoughts and values. This idea was complimented by another significant aspect: the will to power. Nietzsche asserted that life was the will to power, "the will to be master over the multiplicity of sensations," (Nietzsche, "The Will to Power" 268). This aspect supported how a human being thought, behaved, and acted in all circumstances. Nietzsche saw this as a creative act and a human being as always in constant struggle to quench his desire, often excluding the desires of others when in conflict with one's own. He, in fact, saw as intrinsic to this search for accomplishing one's desire any possible violent behavior.

Nietzsche emphasized an attitude towards life that could overcome the feeling of meaninglessness. It began with the idea of life as an eternal recurrence, with no beginning and no end, but as a repetition of the very same life over and over again (Nietzsche, "The Will to Power" 270). Determinism in this sense was inherent in the idea that all suffering, unhappiness and experiences lived would be repeated or relived. And, while this idea was an important point, what was even more interesting was Nietzsche's notion that a superman could view his deterministic reality differently, such that in the very same life there could be a moment that would redeem everything else that happened. Such moment was to make him content with and happy to repeat that life again and again. The superman would come to understand the need for the unity of creation and destruction, good and bad, being able to recognize that life was good even when it was terrible and questionable. The superman would view all the past actions, silly or wise, accidental or achieving, as necessary for becoming himself. Living the life of the superman was, in conclusion, to live with the knowledge of what had already happened, accepting constant reinterpretation according to it. A superman could face life filled with

suffering and absurdity, knowing that the basic conditions of life would not change even when he was in the ideal state of a superman. In a sense, superman was about self-overcoming.

An inherently important piece that supported the concept of a superman was Nietzsche's view that the world was "essentially false" (Nietzsche, "The Will to Power" 269) and in a "state of becoming" (268). Any tendency to assign an external higher power or God was a "falsehood" (269). The process of transcending any notion of a God as intrinsically separate from man needed to be overcome in order for a superman to awaken to the truth of his conditioning. In Nietzsche's view, men were not born with equal claim in that state of becoming, and only a few could be capable with the proper skills to become supermen. He consequently urged for reevaluation of traditional values such as the suppression of emotion, morality, and the emphasis on rationalism. A superman, in his view, could not be restricted by tradition, religion, nor bound by convention but have independent values of his own, withdrawing interest for morality and dismay over social taboos. The superman was one strong enough to overcome humanity itself, when the latter embodied values that denied life.

Jack London incorporated Nietzsche's idea of the superman into *The Call of the Wild*. Buck's initial loss of Judge Miller, his original owner, can be seen as the Nietzschean death of God for Buck. So that, what Buck deals with in the wild is a battle against nihilism. God, or in Buck's case Judge Miller, has given meaning to Buck's world and existence up until that point. Once forcefully taken away from him, Buck comes to know master-slave relations. Shortly after the killing of Curly, Buck demonstrates his quick assumption of a slave's morality. His reaction can be summed up with "so that was the way. No fair play" (London 18). The master's morality may see goodness in the death of Curly: a weak dog is eliminated from among other dogs better skilled at fighting, there is more food to go around, and a set of other considerations both

utilitarian and noble. Buck's negative reaction shows that he has taken on the slave's morality, in that the malicious intent of the savagery overshadows any potential goods of the event. However, he takes on the master's morality soon after when he beats Spitz in their fight to the death. In the heat of battle, the reader is told "[mercy] was a thing reserved for gentler climes" (London 50). Upon winning, Buck "stood... the dominant primordial beast who had made his kill and found it good" (51). In the span of just a few chapters, Buck both disavows the mercy he once wished for Curly while proclaiming the fight that kills Spitz a good development.

After the death of God and conquering the guilt of slave morality, Buck becomes the master of a world without rules. Buck's first method of dealing with this is to find a new God: John Thornton. He is at times very pleased with this replacement god, feeling "love, genuine passionate love... for the first time" (London 90). But this new God figure for Buck seems just as vulnerable to death, and he ultimately is unfulfilled in this relationship. Nihilism is conquered then as Buck strives to be the superman. His pull to the wild is not for the wild's sake, it is for the sake of transcending society and being worldly. According to Nietzsche, "man is a bridge and not a goal" (Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* 444). Man is the bridge between the abyss of nihilism and ultimately becoming the superman. The superman is "[him] who breaketh up their tables of values, the breaker, the lawbreaker ... is the creator" (73). We can see this in Buck as well: "Because of his very great love, he could not steal from this man, but from any man, in any other camp, he did not hesitate an instant" (London 93). Buck both breaks the laws of common society by stealing but forms his own new set of values by deciding who is and is not worth of being stolen from. This is the ultimate way man deals with the death of God, by allowing the superman to create a new set of values.

The discovery that the world and its morality are false (Nietzsche, “The Will to Power” 269) goes hand in hand with an uncompromising search for what is truth: “the will to truth is...merely the desire for a world of the constant” (270). That is how determinism surfaces as the superman arises as the knowledge holder of this realization. Buck finds such “world of the constant,” (270) of recurrence, when he finally accepts the call of the wild and takes ownership of his own capacity to give meaning and value to every action.

An Unconscious Jungian Impact

Psychologist Carl Gustav Jung developed his psychoanalytic theory while partly influenced by the work of Sigmund Freud. Among the central concepts of Jungian theory lies the idea of individuation as a lifelong psychological process of differentiation of the self from an individual’s conscious and unconscious elements. Jung considered this to be the main task of human development. While Jung agreed with Freud that a person’s past and childhood experiences determined future behavior, he also believed that a person was shaped by his future. Determinism here influenced the future, according to Jung, as the imprint of collective knowledge was revealed to a person searching for self-development.² In addition, Jung, unlike Freud, regarded the libido not just as sexual energy, but as generalized psychic energy, a “‘longing’ or ‘urge’” (Tavernier-Courbin 64). For Jung, the purpose of psychic energy was to motivate the individual spiritually, intellectually, and creatively. It was a motivational impulse for seeking to satisfy the demands of the conscious on one side, as well as the unconscious on the other (64).

Jung regarded the psyche as made up of separate but interacting systems. The three main ones were the ego, the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. Of particular

interest to this essay is Jung's most original and controversial contribution to personality theory: the collective (or transpersonal) unconscious. This is a level of unconscious shared with other members of the human species comprising of latent memories from human ancestral and evolutionary past: "The form of the world into which [a person] is born is already inborn in him, as a virtual image" (Jung, *The Collected Works* vol. 12, 300). According to Jung the human mind had innate characteristics imprinted on it as a result of evolution. These universal predispositions stemmed from an ancestral past. Jung called the ancestral memories and images archetypes. These archetypes (see also Jung, *On the Nature of the Psyche*) were images and thoughts that had universal meaning across cultures, showing up as dreams, literature, art or religion. For Jung, the primitive past was the basis of the human psyche, directing, influencing and determining present behavior.

Jung paid special attention to four archetypes: the persona, the anima/animus, the shadow, and the self. The persona or mask was the outward face presented to the world, concealing the real self and conforming to social conditions and norms. The second archetype, the anima/animus, was the mirror image of biological sexuality, the unconscious feminine side in males and the masculine tendencies in women. Each gender manifested attitudes and behavior of the other by virtue of centuries of living together. Next was the shadow. This was the animal side of the personality, the source of both creative and destructive impulses. In line with evolutionary theory, it could be argued that Jung's archetypes may have reflected predispositions that once had survival value. Finally, there was the self, the central overarching concept governing the individuation process, the union of male and female, totality, unity. This was Jung's central archetype of the psyche, providing a sense of unity and integration as the process of

individuation was attained. For Jung, the ultimate aim of every individual was to achieve a state of selfhood or self-actualization.

The existence of a collective unconscious, a collective ancestral imprint that inherently affected personality and triggered the desire for selfhood invited the evolutionary element of determinism to hold a more humanist orientation. Jung argued that many of the problems of modern life were caused by “man’s progressive alienation from his instinctual foundation” (Jung, *The Collected Works* vol. 10, 557). In modern civilization men were discouraged from expressing instinctual tendencies, undermining their full psychological development.

It was thru the process of connecting and awakening the determined set of skills, knowledge and instincts inherited collectively that a human being could achieve a sense of psychological wholeness. In *The Call of the Wild*, therefore, we are allowed to observe thru Buck the Jungian version of the journey to full psychological integration. Jack London was not yet acquainted with the writings of Carl Jung when his novel was published. Yet, his reaction once he stumbled upon Jung’s work was said to have been reaffirming (See Labor, *The Letters of Jack London*) for here was at last a system that called “to completion, to self-identifying and self-sustaining values that would assure man of his nobility” (McClintock 346) even “amidst hints of certain damnation” (346). As scholar Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin points out, “*The Call of the Wild* [was] indeed a shot in the ‘dark,’ that is, in the darkness of the unconscious, in a world of myth and Jungian archetypes” (Tavernier-Courbin 63). Upon discovering Jung’s work towards the end of this life, London recognized in Jungian psychology the terms and ideas that he had tried to dramatize throughout his life.

In *The Call of the Wild*, London's fascination with the primordial and the primitive is evident. In order for Buck to adapt to the primitive environment of the North, he has to journey regressively into his instinctive past to gain access to the skills and strength of his ancestors:

His development (or retrogression) was rapid... And when, on the still, cold nights, he pointed his nose at a star and howled long and wolflike, it was his ancestors, dead and dust, pointing nose at star and howling down through the centuries and through him. And his cadences were their cadences, the cadences which voices their woes and what to them was the meaning of the stillness, and the cold, and the dark (London 28-30).

The emphasis here, as Buck attempts self-actualization, is on whether he has the capacity to become aware of the past, of his collective unconscious, by tapping into a determined set of skills and knowledge that are passed down. In London's view, plasticity, the ability to adapt and adjust to any circumstance and become aware, was the supreme survival skill that would allow for the emergence of the Jungian self. This is only possible as Buck remembers his ancestors, living on in his instincts: "not only did he learn by experience, but instincts long dead became alive again. The domesticated generations fell from him" (London 29).

In Buck we can also recognize the balancing role of his libido as he exhibits the harmonization of both progression and regression. "[He] provides the shadow with free range and is able to listen to both his personal and his collective unconscious; [eventually both] merge harmoniously...[satisfying] most major archetypal urges" (Tavernier-Courbin 64). In fact, a transformation can be seen from the civilized, pet role Buck has at the beginning of the story – his fabricated persona – to the awakening of his shadow when Curly is swiftly killed, and eventually, to the uncovering of his self with the emergence of his collective unconscious. This

latter is evident in the novel as London uses Buck's dreams to take the reader back to the dawn of humanity, to the Stone Age:

Sometimes as he crouched there, blinking dreamily at the flames, it seemed that the flames were of another fire, and that as he crouched by this other fire he saw another and different man ... This other man was shorter of leg and long of arm, with muscles that were stringy and knotted rather than rounded and swelling. The hair of this man was long and matted, and his head slanted back under it from the eyes. He uttered strange sounds and seemed very much afraid of the darkness, into which he peered continually, clutching in his hand, which hung midway between knee and foot, a stick with a heavy stone made fast to the end... At other times this hairy man squatted by the fire with head between his legs and slept... And beyond the fire, in the circling darkness, Buck could see many gleaming coals, two by two... which he knew to be the eyes of great beasts of prey (London 60-61).

London presents in his novel two calls that lure Buck. One lures him to the physical wildness, to the conscious call of other wolves in the forest. The second call is a psychological call of the primitive, to reclaim ancestral knowledge, collective knowledge. So that, by the end of the novel, Buck becomes the embodiment of the most powerful archetype of wholeness, the self. He becomes mythical, his power transcending even his lifetime. He becomes the "Ghost Dog" that is feared by the Yeehats for he has achieved reintegration into nature. His collective unconscious having called him back to a state of knowing and being that, while determined by ancestry and evolutionary heredity, is altogether timeless.

Conclusion

Jack London was a child of his time, fascinated by new concepts and ideas even when they were conflicting, translating his own absorption of their meaning and implication in fictional terms. His abiding as a naturalist writer to the role of determinism in shaping human experience and behavior triggered a continual inner discussion about the nature of life's purpose and the source of intentionality and meaning in any action. As such, *The Call of the Wild* toys with various scientific, philosophical and psychological ideas. One common thread that can be found among all of them as dramatized by London is the way in which determinism serves the process of allowing a character to undertake a journey of self-actualization. From a Darwinian-based attempt to survive and be the most physically fittest to the emergence of the Nietzschean superman, transcending all values and rules while understanding what gives meaning to life. From the relinquishing of the notion of an external God overseeing phenomena and humanity, to the awakening and flourishing of the Jungian self, powerful in its wholeness and its ability to ultimately take the mythical role of a feared god. London's novel is an amalgam of possibilities for dealing with a deterministic view of the world, at times fatalistic, and at other times humanistic. Buck is at once the one that undertakes the process of progression that humans strive on a conscious level as well as the regression leading back to the source of meaning of all human evolutionary experience.

Notes

1. The theoretical summary presented herein is based on analysis by: R. Lanier Anderson, B. Magnus and K.M. Higgins, Alexander Nehamas, and Nietzsche's own writings. For full bibliographic citations, please refer to the Works Cited section.
2. What follows is a summarized assessment of Jung's theory of the psyche and other terms grounded on my own study of several of his works as well as analysis by several scholars. For primary reference please refer to Jung's *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*. The full bibliographic citation can be located in the Works Cited section.

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