



## Life Lessons: The Philosophy of Growth Contained in Jack London's *White Fang* — An Exploration of Survival and Love

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**Abstract:** As one of the outstanding representative works of the famous American realist writer Jack London, the story tells the growth process of a little gray wolf named "White Fang". This novel describes how a young wolf enters the civilized world of human beings from the wilderness, and tells the legendary experience of the main character, White Fang, who eventually turns from a wolf to a dog through trials and tribulations. This novel tells people that human society is different from the animal world, and they need not only to adapt to the environment but also to accept the ethical and moral constraints in order to obtain a broader space for growth if they want to survive in society. By reviewing the main content of *White Fang* and the author's biography, this paper analyzes the background of the creation of *White Fang* and highlights the growth of White Fang and the meaning of life by analyzing the description of the survival experience of White Fang in the work to show the tenacity of its vitality, to reflecting on its inspiration and reflection on real life through the theme of the law of life and the principles of life in the novel. Furthermore, it aims at giving a positive interpretation of the meaning of life.

**Keywords:** *White Fang*, Jack London, philosophy of growth, survival and love

### I. Introduction

*White Fang* is one of the best novels about dogs written by American author Jack London in 1906. To a large extent, thanks to the creation of a series of dog stories, Jack London is considered one of the most influential writers in American literature in the early 20th century. His works are mostly based on personal life experiences, so the content is authentic and natural. Setting in the frozen land of the northwest frontier of Canada, *White Fang* recounts how a young wolf enters the civilized world of human beings from the struggle in the wilderness and turns from a wolf into a dog. The novel shows the writer's thoughts on the reality of human existence and his call for civilization. The thematic idea of *White Fang* is a reflection of Jack London's wish to start a warm family life again. The growing experience of the main character White Fang is a process of returning to civilization and morality, and this new novel reflects his belief at that time, "Love can cure the most painful despair" [1].

The novel, *White Fang*, describes the legendary experience of a wolf living in a barbaric area, who undergoes trials and tribulations in his constant interactions with people. And finally, under the general environment of human society and love, his wildness and bestiality keep metamorphosing and his humanity gradually returns. The author combines his perception of many painful lessons in real life and his

profound understanding of the philosophy of life to create his artistic image, so that *White Fang*, which seems to be a story about an animal's legendary experience, contains profound life moral and infectious power. Thus, it brings out the multiple propositions of love and the law of survival in the work. By reviewing the touching story of *White Fang* and the biography of the author Jack London with his upbringing environment and writing background, this paper outlines the theme of the work. Meanwhile, through the analysis of the process of White Fang's return to civilization after all the rough sufferings, it has provoked deep thinking on growing up. The writer believes that in the process of growing up, one should learn to understand life first, gradually try to build and cultivate an independent personality, always uphold a growth mindset, and constantly keep strengthening oneself, and at the same time realizes the meaning of growth and pursuit of love and life.

### II. General Overview

#### 1. An Adventurous Life:

##### Brief Biography of Jack London

Jack London (1875-1916) is well known in the world literature and is honored as the father of proletarian literature. His animal novels depict the game and integration between nature, animals and man. The very era and personal experience of his life provided a steady stream of inspiration



and a constant source of materials for his excellent and brilliant works so that he enjoys a lofty status in the history of American literature.

As a fictionist, journalist, political theorist, and pamphleteer, London carved out a place of unprecedented breadth in the early-twentieth-century American literary landscape [2]. He was an articulate and splendid spokesman for his time and one of the American writers, who “broke the ice that was congealing American letters and brought life and literature into a meaningful relation to each other” [3].

Jack London was born in 1876, from a family of bankrupt farmers, in California during the Great Depression. Hardships and poverty marked his survival from childhood to adulthood. However, poverty did not overwhelm him. On the contrary, rather, it was these painful experiences that sharpened him. More fortunately, reading became the place where he developed his interests and devoted his energy. His works reveal an unimaginable brilliance and value due to his rich personal life experiences, with profundity and complexity yet exudation of a vague openness and reflection on life everywhere.

The majority of his works were drawn mainly from his own personal experience, reflecting the stories about men and animals against the environment and survival against hardships. London, as an illegitimate child, passed his childhood in poverty in the Oakland slums. Known for novels like *White Fang*, *The Call of the Wild*, and *The Sea Wolf*, the author, Jack London, also wrote gripping short stories, including *To Build a Fire* and of course *Up the Slide*. All of these are informed by London’s adventurous life, which included stints as a sailor and as a gold prospector in the Klondike region of Alaska, where there was a Gold Rush in the 1890s. When 17 years old, he ventured to sea on a sealing ship. It was degrading thirty-day imprisonment, as a turning point of his life, that made him decide to turn to education and pursue a career in writing. In 1897, the Klondike gold rush had begun. Leaving college to seek his fortune in the snowy north, London has not become rich whereas, but has been furnished with plenty of material for his writing career. What struck him deeply is that he found himself where nobody talks but everyone thinks, so you get your true perspective, as well as he got himself [4].

The author’s personal experience provides a trusted natural background for the work *White Fang* — the natural environment of Klondike, namely Alaska in the ice and snow. His years in the Klondike searching for gold left a mark in his best short stories. His works are a record of his times and worthy of serious condition [5]. The Klondike is to London what the sea is to Herman Melville. This experience, out of question, did serve as an initiation by transforming the youth into the man, the man into the author, and the amateur into the professional. At that age, literary men integrated their ideas about man’s place in society with Darwin’s new conception of man’s place in nature [6]. Heavily influenced

by Darwinism, London’s work *White Fang* might best illustrate his ideas of Darwinism and naturalism through the image of White Fang.

## **2. A Touching story: Synopsis of *White Fang***

*White Fang* is a book written mostly from the perspective, of a wolf, whose name is White Fang, exactly a mixed-breed wolf dog who has a quarter of a dog’s blood, and therefore, has both the wildness of a wolf and the loyalty of a dog. The book was written by Jack London and published in 1906. Given that it is a popular book, it has been made into a movie several times. *White Fang* is set in Canada during the Klondike Gold Rush. In the novel, White Fang, Jack London tells the story of a wolf cub and the humans that intersect his life. In the story, the writer has shown the changes point of view between humans and wolves.

At the very beginning of the story, opening with a beautifully detailed picture of the Yukon, *White Fang* starts with two men, Henry and Bill, who is trying to survive with very little food and protection. They have a pack of sled dogs, but strangely, the numbers keep changing. Gradually, they realize that there is a female wolf luring the male wolves away during the night. Unfortunately, Bill gets killed instead, while Henry is left alone with only two wolves. Afraid of dying, eventually, he is rescued by a group of men at the end. As the story enters the next part, it is told from the perspective of the she-wolf, Kiche, a mixed-breed wolf-dog, who is the mother of White Fang’s. White Fang, who is three-quarters wolf and one-quarter husky, enters the story in the first month of his life. What follows is the step-by-step growth process, from his nest out to experience all the hardships and twists and turns, so as to learn how to hunt as well as how to survive in the tough world.

In the novel, White Fang has experienced three life twists and turns in its growth course. As well as three masters have been replaced, each change of owner is refracted with different classes and social realities of society, combining the connection between animals and society more closely. Firstly, before he is a year old, White Fang is captured by an Indian, Gray Beaver, who trains him as a sled dog. Then, while on an excursion to Fort Yukon, Gray Beaver is tricked into selling his dog to a man named Beauty Smith, who turns White Fang into the Fighting Wolf by constantly tormenting him, both physically and emotionally. And lastly, while White Fang eventually meets his match with a bulldog, just as he is about to die, the wolf is saved by Weedon Scott, who slugs Beauty Smith and manages to free White Fang from the bulldog. As a result, the wolf-dog has been bought and taken back to cabin by a mining engineer, Scott. It is here that White Fang first learns about love and becomes civilized. In the end of the story, the gray wolf received an honorary title “the Blessed Wolf” from his host family.

## **III. Diverse Symbols of the Theme**

### **1. The law of survival: Survival of the Fittest**

In *White Fang*, whether it is the description of the natural environment or the portrayal of the growing environment, the growing experience of White Fang reflects his strong need for survival and his excitement to explore the unknown world. Jack London, who lived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was deeply influenced by the Theory of Evolution, so the natural law of Darwin is conveyed in *White Fang* at all times. This gray cub is much stronger and more active than the other cubs, adhering to the theme of the “survival of the fittest” [7]. The spirit of strength, unyielding faith, and fearless courage are evident between lines, and are full of passion and resonance. Jack London’s sense of survival is expressed in the desire and praise for the strong, which includes not only physical strength but also spiritual strength. In *White Fang*, Jack London expounds the idea of environmental determinism more than once, which refers to that animals and plants are the products of the geographical environment. In the relationship between biology and the environment, creatures are the initiative to lead to environmental changes, while the geographical environment also strictly restricts the activities, development and changes of biology [8]. This idea is fully interpreted from the different life journey of White Fang from wild to civilization. White Fang was born to a wolf, One-Eye, after an Indian female dog, Kiche, was lost. Shortly after his birth, his mother took him into the bush to meet his former Indian master. This owner, Grey Beaver, traded White Fang to Beauty Smith, a white man, in exchange for alcohol. Since then, he is often taken to exhibitions by his new owner, or bets and other dog battles, with invincible, but also dangerous times of danger. The life and growth of White Fang is a process of constantly adapting to its living environment while getting stronger and stronger. In this process, it gradually learns a lot from its own environment. It was born in the wilderness and witnessed the cutthroat world. Then, a coincidence brought White Fang from the wilderness to the human beings. However, his first experience with people is the life in a human camp, where he has not been cared for and loved, so he became withdrawn, cruel and hostile. Especially under the abuse and manipulation of evil people, White Fang becomes more vicious than ever, and turns to be a fighting wolf full of hatred and killing. This transformation allows the young White Fang to gain the status of a strong survivor.

White Fang, since childhood in the wilderness, has kept wandering around the wildness and suffering from frustration and hardship, so gradually gets acquainted with the unknown world. What was believed firmly is that only when you are strong enough can you hunt other species, and you will not be hunted by any more powerful species.

## **2. The principle of developing relationships: Born to love**

The description of White Fang in the novel shows the pain and awakening of a man deeply engraved in Jack London’s heart. In this regard, the growth of white Fang also implied a theme of the pursuit of the dream and exploration of life,

which is reflected in the development of the novel’s plot. Apparently, the different growth stages of White Fang presuppose the longing and pursuit of love from different levels.

On the one hand, for the lack of understanding of love, there is a greater need to have the experience of love by nature. In the early years of White Fang’s development, White Fang was born with a vague sense of his father and siblings. In its memory, the father is always at the entrance of the cave, and often disappears into a white light. And its siblings from the initial four, into one, who, but once also because of hunger, cannot even lift his head. In addition, White Fang has a deep impression of her mother as a stern but responsible person, who, in order to survive, has taken him plunging from the wolf pack to the crowd. In the novel, no matter it is the father who cannot be seen again, the siblings whose impressions are blurred, or the mother who acts cold and strange when they meet again after separation, in the mind of the little wolf, loneliness, hunger and fear are the companions that grow up with White Fang. It seems that what comes from the deepest part of White Fang’s heart like a cry can be clearly heard, and at the same time, it also confirms the fact that the softest part of the heart is longing for warmth.

Besides, because the wrong love has been felt, the need for true love is even greater. As White Fang grows up, the desire for the outside world in its heart gives it the courage to run into the unknown world. The fuzzy hole is the door to the world. Meantime, the terrible fear of the unknown also expanded, as if to foretell it will have to go through those countless trials and tribulations before it can truly grow. Beginning after the mother’s subjugation to man. White Fang’s life in the Indian village is anything but pleasant as he is targeted for abuse. Later on, he is sold to a man named Beauty Smith, who is so ugly that his name was an antithesis, is particularly impressed with the dog. During this time with the Indians, white Fang not only does not get the master’s love and kindness, but also troubled by the failure to have a peaceful day. For White Fang, the world is sinister and barbaric, without warmth. He serves humanity with responsibility and awe, but without love.

However, eventually when the matter of life and death happens. After being rescued by Scott, his new master, White Fang has found that the human is different from the previous Indians. They are not barbaric or irritable, and they would not beat him. Nevertheless, White Fang, who has been tortured for a long time, is temporarily unable to accept this change. When human touch him, he would still roar, biting the people to protect himself, so Scott tries his best to create a loving environment for White Fang, inspiring his life instinct with love. Scott insisted on soothing White Fang every day. At first, he is suspicious and hostile, but later he gradually likes the caress. With time elapsing, this feeling of love continues to accelerate. White Fang knows this feeling is good, but he does not know what love is. From the original

the change in his feelings can be shown with sincerity, “Human kindness was like a sun shining upon him, and he flourished like a flower planted in good soil” [9]. Through the novel, it presents his slow adaptation to the environment that there is no savageness and no struggle, and he became docile, willing to contact his companions.

Hence, love, somehow, as a thread running through the different stages of a dog’s life, edges a little bit closer when White Fang is one the way back to civilization and return to the moral.

#### **IV. Inspiration of Growth And Life**

In the novel *White Fang*, author Jack London vividly depicts the process of domesticating a wolf into a dog with a unique animal perspective. As far as the author is concerned, who comes from a poor family and lives at the bottom of society, he has a deeper understanding of the society. Through his description of animals, what has been allegorically implied is the personality and survival status of people, reflecting social reality more profoundly while promoting human understanding and thinking about life and growth.

##### **1. The constant pursuit of life: Learn to be strong**

In the story, White Fang has gone through a period of adventure to explore the new world. It is fear and adventure that brings numerous thrills to White Fang, such as the pain getting from sharp beak and claws of the grouses, the brutality caused by the swiftly swooping eagle, the suffocating suffering led by the flooding of stream, and the threat of death brought to it by trappers. All of these experiences are the first lesson the world teaches it, which is about that life is always in danger, so it needs to learn and to become strong as fast as possible to survive.

*White Fang*, a novel by Jack London, is about the challenging life of a wolf in the Yukon. In the story, it can be shown that the only thing it had to face is fight, fighting with other brutal dogs, with villain, as well as with everything will threaten him. Glowing and snarling are the sign to get ready for the potential fight. It seems very simple and pure for the wolf who has to bear and adapt to the wild. Nevertheless, there is no deny that the human society is much more complicated than the wild world. Not only the people around but also the involution and competition from different fields as well as the stress and challenges among people and the world can bring a huge burden on men. As a result, having a better picture of the environment, London has created could really usher readers into wild world and leave a unique impression from dogs, the dog’s feelings as well. It is truth universally acknowledged that life can be hard, and even some parts are harder than others, which is true not just for human beings, but also for animals. Jack London’s *White Fang* following a wolf in the Yukon from birth throughout his life, apparently, he faces plenty of challenges and tends to continue to transform himself.

In *White Fang* author Jack London skillfully uses philosophical ideas to advance the story’s plot. This is Darwinism, the idea that the process of natural selection acting on demographic change will lead to the survival of the best competitors and the continuous improvement of the population [Darwin]. This belief also brings profound enlightenment to people’s lives. Both the main character, White Fang, and human beings need to adapt to different changes in their environment and strive to grow in such changes, learn to be strong in the face of difficulties, and experience the meaning of life in different stages of growth. Just as *White Fang* shows how one’s behavior can be adjusted through external influences, and demonstrates the potential existence of social Darwinism. On the one hand, through the depiction of the nature in the very first paragraph of *White Fang*, the intense imagery has signified the harsh living conditions. Silence and desolation are key images in the opening passage, revealing the features of the environment in which the White Fang grows. “A vast silence reigned over the land. The land itself was a desolation, lifeless, without movement, so lone and cold that the spirit of it was not even that of sadness” [9]. The other is from the fact that the human characters have a significant impact on White Fang, which drives major changes in his behavior. One of these changes occurs when he is forced into an unfamiliar and hostile environment. He must learn to survive with his new master, Beauty Smith, who is described as a sadistic master who beats White Fang and starves him to make him fight harder [2]. Most of the time, White Fang suffered from lots of neglect and abuse from Smith. It is in this bitter experience that the physical and mental pain as well as humiliation make him more profoundly aware that in the natural world, the winner is king and there is no easy way to go. It is in this bitter experience, the physical and mental pain as well as humiliation make white teeth more profoundly aware that in the natural world the winner is king and there is no middle way to go.

Therefore, the inspiration that can be brought to people through the growth process of White Fang is to be stronger. Specifically, in one way, it is necessary to reflect on personal experience and growth trajectory during the growth process and expand one’s ability through continuous learning; secondly, when facing difficulties, it is vital to keep the faith firmly, face the pain directly and challenge oneself boldly while opt to prove oneself with an unyielding attitude.

##### **2. The longing desire for life:**

###### **Learn to love and be loved**

The novel *White Fang* presents the evolution of a wolf into a dog from a unique perspective. The work refines the delicate relationship between human and wolf. In the very beginning, the initial precaution and brutality has been exposed when meeting people. Later, the gradual acceptance has been shown and gradually the harmonious relationship between man and animals has been built up under the call and love of

human, after getting along with each other and establishing a peaceful relationship under the inspiration and love of people. The grey wolf, White Fang, an individual creature, shows the change process of a beast from savagery to a dog with civilization. It is the process of a ferocious wolf turning into a civilized dog that makes people deeply appreciate this change and surprisingly marvel at the connection and infectious power between life.

The true meaning of the novel lies in that the purpose of life is to live to protect love and enjoy love, rather than fight and plunder meaninglessly. In the story, White Fang, a wolf with one-fourth dog blood, undergoes various trials and twists in the process of interacting with humans. The White Fang in the novel has experienced three life twists and turns in its growth process, and has changed three owners. They are respectively Gray Beaver, an Indian, who teaches White Fang the lessons of the gods, Beauty Smith, a very ugly and cruel man, and Weedon Scott, representing the good in life and able to transform the wolf into a civilized animal. They all have exerted different degrees of impact on the growth of young White Fang. What is more important is the different interpretations of love have been shown through the whole story. In particular, finally meeting the fatherly master Scott, White Fang comes out of the wilderness, living a life of domestication happily. In the interaction with its master, White Fang shows warm and friendly love. For the past, it has never enjoyed this special friendship, but now, because of the master's dedication, the White Fang are gradually being influenced by love. And meanwhile thanks to such contact, the White Fang not only get love from the master, but also learns how to express love. As a scene depicted in the work, it is love that helps the White Fang arrive in a new destination and brings White Fang to a higher realm of life. White Fang's joy, his great love, was surging in his heart, and he was struggling to express it. Suddenly he thrust his head forward and buried himself under his master's arm. Only his ears were exposed... [9].

Originally, White Fang is a wolf, which should embody its life value and fulfill its animal mission in the wild natural environment, but its extraordinary and tough life course brings it practical and rich life experiences. Finally, fortunately, it is the environment full of love and care that makes it open the door of love and return to the civilized human society, where there is the power of love exists. Reflecting how love can tame natural behavior and instincts, this novel shows the great power of love between man and beast. As White Fang learns to love Weedon Scott, this love produces a desire in the dog to do anything to please his beloved master, which includes having Weedon's children climb and play with him, as well as learning to leave chickens alone, although no question the taste was extremely pleasing to him. It is the experience of being loved that makes White Fang tamed by love.

On the whole, in the one hand, personally, London has suffered the sorrows in his tough life. Hence, he can deeply feel the confusion and bewilderment brought to people from that era. As people become more and more selfish and greedy who are urged by the satisfaction from wealthy and fulfillment of the desire, the human nature of warmth and civilized part has faded away. Consequently, this is what the author really dreams in his own life, expecting to live a free and happy life full with love and warmth. So, the novel *White Fang* embodies the author's expectations and realizes his innermost dream. It is a journey to bring life back to its true nature, inspiring people to touch the essence of the heart and to believe that the need for love is a pursuit hidden in the deepest part of the heart. Obviously, there is always invisible kindness in growing up, and one should learn all the lessons that life prepares for. Through such an inspiring story, the power of love is thoroughly shown to people. It is supposed to create full and meaningful lives by cultivating the simple but meaningful habits of love, such as generosity, silence, truth-seeking, honesty, forgiveness and community. For love is an ability, not a state [10]. People can learn to love and to be loved to improve their relationships with family and friends in their lives, thus gaining the joy of growth.

## V. Conclusion

The novel *White Fang* contains extremely rich culture and value connotations, dripping with the subtle relationship between humans and animals. In the novel, White Fang, as the protagonist, leaves overwhelming impression of his tough fighting spirit on readers, and demonstrates the admirable affection of his loyalty to his master. From the descriptions of the novel, it can be witnessed the transformation process of wolf into dog, which also reflected the change of society, where terrible cruelty and low moral standards has been revealed, representing inspiration and aspiration for the development of human civilization from the other side. Jack London's works are full of love for life and passion for fighting, and meanwhile with a profound interpretation of the law of life, which makes his works brilliant and attractive around the world.

This work is rich in philosophy and profound allegory, and presents a deep understanding of survival consciousness. By giving a general overview of the story of *White Fang*, the author sorts out the growth course and life experiences of White Fang to analyze the diverse theme of *White Fang*, as well as appreciate the rich connotation of it. At the same time, combined with the introduction of Jack London's own life background, it reflects that life can be examined and rethought on depend that. From the experience of White Fang, it has been reflected upon people's awareness and state of growth in present life. The author hopes to further think about the philosophy of growth and the meaning of life through the thorough analysis of the theme and the understanding of the work. On the one hand, the work

reflects Darwinism, namely the idea of survival of the fittest, which is confined to the fierce struggle for survival. In this novel, the powerful force of civilization is reflected from the process in which White Fang learns to love and be tamed by his last master. Thus, it suggests that the creatures who adapt to civilization are strong in another sense. On the other hand, it highlights the key role that love plays in this process. Love is the force to reconstruct the meaning of life and the prime motivation for nurturing and growing.

All in all, the novel conveys an intriguing and far-reaching philosophy of life. The author believes that giving a positive interpretation of the meaning of life makes it easy for people to return to their true nature in the midst of intense social life. By developing a lifelong growth mindset and learning the philosophy of loving and being loved, it can help people build positive thinking and promote self-growth in the long run. In other words, in the process of growing up, one must learn to understand life at first, so as to build and cultivate an independent personality. Having a growth mindset and mentality makes one strong through rich life experiences; meanwhile in the constant pursuit of love and life, one could realize the meaning of life by going through trials and tribulations.

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