



Jack London's Consciousness of Nature Ecology in The Law of Life: from the Perspective of Eco-aesthetic

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Abstract: As one of the prominent representatives of naturalism, Jack London's literary creations are deeply and intricately permeated with profound ecological thoughts. These thoughts not only reflect the characteristics of his era but also carry forward a kind of ecological consciousness that transcends time. The Law of Life stands out as one of the most representative novels among his works, crafted with the unique and harsh setting of the northern frontier. This setting endows the novel with a distinct charm and a profound ecological connotation. This paper, firmly rooted in the level of natural ecology within the comprehensive framework of ecological criticism, meticulously proceeds from the aesthetic principles of Naturalness and Wholeness in ecological aesthetics for a detailed analysis. Through in-depth exploration, it is found that in The Law of Life, Jack London diverges from the common focus on human beings and instead casts his gaze firmly on nature itself. He attaches great importance to the overall ecological balance and ecological benefits of nature, regarding them as crucial elements that should be respected and safeguarded. This perspective reveals his deep understanding and concern for the ecological environment. This article aims to reveal Jack London's ecological awareness of nature in The Law of Life, which is conducive to readers' better understanding of The Law of Life and learning Jack London's attitude towards nature.

Keywords: The Law of Life, Ecological aesthetics, Naturalness, Wholeness

1. Introduction

1.1 Jack London and The Law of Life

Jack London who was born in 1876 and passed away in 1916, is a writer of great influence in the history of American literature, and his life was replete with legendary elements. Since he was born into a poor family, he had to endure countless hardships during his early years. He took up jobs as a child laborer and a sailor, through which he was able to immerse himself deeply in the lower echelons of society. These rich life experiences, which were like a wellspring of inspiration, provided him with profound and extensive material for his literary creations. In 1897, when he joined the gold rush party and set out for the Klondike region in Canada, this gold rush experience not only subjected him to great hardships but also allowed him to gain profound insights into the relationships between man and nature, as well as the complex issues of survival and human nature. These insights, which became crucial, served as important sources and themes for his works. His masterpieces, such as *The Call of the Wild*, *The Valley of the Moon*, and *Love of Life*, among others, are widely renowned.

The "Northern Frontier" and the "South Seas" were two new frontiers explored by the United States at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The novels written by Jack London that use these areas as the geographical context and main background for his subject matter are known as "Northern Frontier novels" and "South Seas novels". London depicted indigenous people in both his "Northern Frontier" and "South Seas" novels [1]. In the "Northern Frontier" novels, the Indian are the local Native Americans. *The Law of Life* is one of the representative Northern Frontier novels of Jack London.

The story which was written in 1901, has its setting in the frigid and desolate Alaskan wilderness, a place that serves as a stark and unforgiving backdrop to the events that unfold. The protagonist, Koskoosh, is an elderly and enfeebled Native American elder who, when the tribe migrates, is callously left behind to patiently await the inevitable approach of death. As he sits there, alone and vulnerable, he finds himself delving deep into his memories, recollecting the arduous experiences of his youth when he had to grapple with the raw power of nature. He has, over the course of his life, been a witness to the cruel reality of his tribesmen being gradually eliminated in the harsh and unforgiving environments that surround them. And now, the inexorable hand of fate has reached him, and it is his turn to confront the final chapter of his life. While he is waiting for the ultimate end, the menacing presence of the approaching wolves serves to heighten his sense of fear and despair, creating an atmosphere of palpable tension. However, paradoxically, at the very same time, he is also engaging in profound introspection about the fundamental law of life. Through this process of reflection, he comes to the realization that the death of an individual is an integral and inevitable part of the natural cycle, much like the fate of those in the tribe who were abandoned simply because they were unable to adapt to the unforgiving environment. In this way, he understands that such sacrifices are, in fact, a means for life to persist and continue its eternal journey, a cycle of birth, struggle, and death that is as old as time itself.

1.2 Eco-aesthetic

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In the contemporary era, as the process of globalization surges forward, the ecological crisis has emerged as one of the pivotal issues that demand urgent attention and extensive consideration. With the gradual ascent of ecological literature, the field of ecological criticism came into being during the 1970s. It is crucial to note that the term “ecology” within the realm of ecological criticism does not carry the same meaning as the concept of ecology in the natural sciences. Primarily, it denotes an ecological ideology, which encompasses a set of beliefs and values regarding the relationship between human beings and the natural world. Secondly, it also refers to an ecological aesthetic view, which involves the appreciation and evaluation of the beauty and significance of nature from an ecological perspective, and which emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of all living things[2]. The French philosopher Félix Guattari divided the ecological ideology of ecological criticism into three types of ecologies: natural ecology, mental ecology, and social ecology[3]. Professor Lu Shuyuan from Soochow University also proposed a similar ecological trichotomy in his book *Eco-Literature* to clearly explain the meaning of ecological literature and the relationships among humans, society, and nature [4].

This ecological trichotomy includes: first, natural ecology which takes nature as the main object. It is a system in which organisms and the environment in nature interact and serves as the material basis for human survival. The purpose of natural ecology is to regain the pure natural state of humanity. Second, social ecology, which studies aspects such as the organization, systems, and culture of human society and affects interpersonal relationships, such as social classes and political systems. Third, mental ecology, which focuses on the relationship between humans and themselves based on the study of spiritual emotions. These viewpoints provide important directions and theoretical guidance for the subsequent study of ecological criticism in ecological literature.

Ecological aesthetics, as the name implies, is a brand-new aesthetic theory that organically combines ecology and aesthetics. It is a theory under the framework of ecological criticism. In the article *On Ecological Aesthetics*, the renowned aesthetician Zeng Fanren argued that broadly speaking, ecological aesthetics studies the aesthetic state in which humans and nature, humans and society, and humans and themselves are in ecological balance [5]. This is also the meaning of ecological aesthetics recognized by ecological literature scholars and is essentially consistent with the three types of ecologies in ecological criticism. In addition, Professor Wang Nuo from Xiamen University put forward three principles of ecological aesthetics, also known as the three principles of ecological aesthetics, in his article *The Aesthetic Principles of Ecological Criticism*: the principle of naturalness, the principle of wholeness, and the principle of integration [6-7].

The principle of naturalness starts from the aesthetic purpose. The primary purpose of ecological aesthetics is to aestheticize nature, highlighting the natural aesthetic object rather than the aesthetic subject. It emphasizes the appreciation and expression of the beauty of nature itself, rather than using nature as a background or tool to express the emotions, thoughts, or personality pursuits of the aesthetic subject. The principle of wholeness is from the perspective of aesthetic vision. Ecological aesthetics does not only contemplate individual aesthetic objects but also examines their impact on the overall ecosystem within the natural system. What is beneficial to the harmony and stability of the ecosystem is beautiful, while what disrupts and damages the overall harmony and stability of the ecosystem is ugly.

This article is mainly based on the natural ecological aspect of ecological criticism. From the perspective of aesthetic principles of naturalness and wholeness in ecological aesthetics, it analyzes the natural ecological consciousness reflected in Jack London's *The Law of Life*.

2. Literature Review

Since Jack London is regarded as one of the great representatives of naturalism, in China, scholars mainly interpret from different perspectives the appreciation of nature, ecological consciousness and other elements reflected in his works. Duan Hongyu studies Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*. She believes that this work deconstructs the anthropocentric view, represents the germination of London's ecological thought, and makes the ecological consciousness of harmonious coexistence between human beings and nature become the mainstream [8]. Drawing on the theory of ecological criticism, Xu Meng expounds Jack London's diversified ecological consciousness from the perspectives of natural ecology, social ecology and spiritual ecology respectively. She argues that Jack London's ecological consciousness is characterized by regularity and the dynamic nature of the overall development of ecological consciousness [9]. Shang Xiaojin also explores the ecological concept reflected in *The Call of the Wild* from the perspective of ecological criticism. She holds that human beings and the natural world form a harmonious unity, and that living in harmony with a nature full of life and vitality is the ultimate destination of mankind [10]. Different from these studies, Gong Jianming focuses on Jack London's writing artistic style. He contends that Jack London's novels possess a unique artistic style, and that they effectively convey the themes of the novels in terms of writing techniques, character construction, settings and other aspects [11].

In foreign studies, scholars mainly focus on the literary and writing characteristics of Jack London's works. Different scholars have explored the issues related to the form of Jack Londo's works, analyzing the characteristics and deficiencies of his works in terms of literary form, as well as how this form affects the expressiveness and endurance of the works. They have also evaluated the role of race in Jack London's works, delving into the racial contradictions and conflicts presented in the works, along with the social reality and the author's ideological concepts reflected behind these descriptions [12]. Wilcox mainly explores how Jack London was influenced by Kipling and how he employed the writing technique of naturalism in his early works. This includes descriptions of the relationship between humans and nature, the struggles of characters to survive in harsh environments, and the dominance of natural laws over human destiny, etc., aiming to reveal the manifestations, characteristics, and significance of naturalism in his early novels [13]. In addition, some scholars have utilized theoretical approaches such as race, gender, class, post-structuralism, and new historicism to

study Jack London's works [14].

3. The Application of Eco-aesthetic in The Law of Life

3.1 The Naturalness of Nature

Naturalness emphasizes taking nature as the aesthetic object and stresses the experience and expression of the beauty inherent in nature itself. Immanuel Kant once said that the aesthetic experience of beautiful nature can evoke pleasure in the forms of natural things and an interest in their own existence [15]. The beauty of nature is independent of human values and desires. Therefore, naturalness is an inherent attribute of nature. Nature possesses various forms of beauty, such as the beauty of biodiversity, the beauty of colors and forms, the beauty of power and shock, and the beauty of extreme environments. Generally speaking, these forms of beauty can be divided into two categories: ecological beauty and the beauty of power.

3.1.1 Natural Beauty of Nature

In *The Law of Life*, Jack London engaged in a meticulous and subtle portrayal of the northern wilderness. Even though he refrained from delving into extensive, direct descriptions of the natural landscape, readers are still able to conjure up vivid mental images of this northern wilderness through the scattered fragments of his words. The expansive white snowfield, for instance, glistens like countless diamonds under the radiant sunlight, bearing a striking resemblance to an immense silver carpet that nature has artfully unfurled. It stretches out interminably, reaching all the way to the horizon where it seamlessly merges with the sky, a sky so incredibly blue that it appears almost translucent. In the distance, the imposing icebergs stand sentinel-like, much like colossal, slumbering giants. Their silhouettes emerge and fade gently, veiled in the ever-shifting interplay of sunlight and mist, exuding an air of cold and enigmatic beauty. The wilderness, which remains cloaked in ice and snow throughout the year, serves as a silent witness to the annual spectacle of schools of spawning salmon making their arduous journey back when the rivers thaw in the warmth of summer. And in the harsh grip of winter, herds of reindeer embark on their epic migrations across the vast expanse of this wilderness. The sound of their hooves, rhythmic and powerful, is like the very pulse of the earth, resonating with a steady beat upon the frozen ground. Hot on the heels of these reindeer herds are the Arctic wolves. These predators are not mere opportunistic hunters; they possess a keen understanding of their environment and know precisely to target the weak, the old, and the sickly among the reindeer. When the sun shines with renewed vigor in the springtime, a whole new cast of characters emerges. Mosquitoes, rabbits, and polar bears make their appearances, and the tree leaves are adorned with budding sprouts. Everything in this wilderness adheres to the rhythm of life, a rhythm that has been meticulously crafted and generously bestowed by the immutable laws of nature.

As London weaves the narrative of the life cycle within the story, he simultaneously showcases the ecological beauty of the northern wilderness as it transforms through the different seasons, presenting a rich tapestry of nature's ever-changing yet harmonious existence.

3.1.2 Unconscious Horror of the Law of Life

Ecological aesthetics not only welcomes the positive aspects of nature but also acknowledges its negative elements. Besides ecological beauty, nature also possesses the beauty of power. This kind of power is awe-inspiring because nature does not always smile; it is also fraught with hardships and dangers. On the one hand, this is manifested in the powerful natural forces demonstrated by natural movements such as volcanic eruptions and glacier breakages, which evoke a sense of reverence. On the other hand, it is reflected in the irresistible force of natural laws. The law of life, one of the natural laws, states that all things in nature, whether animals, plants, or humans, will eventually die.

When old Koskoosh learned that he would be abandoned to await death during this tribal migration, "the thought made the old man panicky for the moment". He constantly paid attention to the noises of the tribe's departure and complained occasionally. Moreover, when he recalled the old people he had left in the snow in the past, he felt a sense of self-reproach. Through Koskoosh's psychological activities during the tribal migration, it can be seen that, as the former chief, despite having dedicated so much to his tribe, he still has to face the same helplessness and fear of death as the previous elders. After all the tribesmen had migrated away, leaving him alone, he felt "I am as a last year's leaf, clinging lightly to the stem. The first breath that blows, and I fall". The natural physical decline and weakness plunged him into deep unease, and he was afraid of dying alone in the snow. However, when the wolves discovered him, he brandished a piece of firewood, and sniffs turned to snarls. Although his limbs were paralyzed, he still tried to resist, demonstrating Koskoosh's unconscious fear of death. Additionally, the story also depicts a moose being chased by wolves. An old moose couldn't keep up with its companions, and the wolves clung to it relentlessly. For the moose, the wolves symbolize death. The moose was knocked down twice but managed to stand up again during the wolf attack, driven by its strong will to survive. Nevertheless, the moose's helplessness and struggle in the face of the wolves illustrate how fragile individual life is in the face of powerful natural forces. Whether it is the moose's running, resistance, or its ultimate death, they all reveal the harsh reality that life can disappear at any moment. This direct portrayal of death touches the old man's innermost fear of the finiteness and fragility of his own life. Subconsciously, Koskoosh also understands that, like the moose, he is a part of nature and equally subject to the law of life.

Death is a powerful force of nature. The deaths of both the old moose and old Koskoosh in the story reflect the inevitability and irresistibility of the law of life, which is the beauty of nature's power. The power of nature is intangible and mighty, surpassing the will and ability of individuals. Therefore, we must recognize the power of nature and avoid

inadvertently provoking it, which could lead to unpredictable consequences. Just as the moose cannot escape the pursuit of the wolves, humans cannot escape the sanctions of nature.

3.2 The Wholeness of Nature

As the second principle of ecological aesthetics, wholeness is in line with the holism of ecological criticism. The principle of wholeness requires that within the entire ecosystem, individuals should contribute to the balance and stability of the whole. Anything that is beneficial to the harmony of the ecological whole can be regarded as beautiful and good; conversely, it is considered ugly and evil. It can be said that the principle of wholeness in ecological aesthetics pursues the balanced beauty of the natural whole. The balanced beauty of the natural whole is manifested in two aspects: natural dynamic balance and cycle, and the relationship between the individual and the whole.

3.2.1 Harmony and Stability of Nature

Rousseau believes that “The more sensitive the soul of the observer, the greater the ecstasy aroused in him by his harmony and in a state of blissful self-abandonment he loses himself in the immensity of this beautiful order, with which he feels himself at once. All individual objects escape him; he sees and feels nothing but the unity of all things”[16]. As a writer sensitive to nature and life, Jack London’s descriptions of the northern wilderness are beautiful and exhibit a balanced beauty.

A harmonious and stable nature does not mean that it is unchanging; rather, it is in a state of dynamic balance and cycle. In *The Law of Life*, this is manifested in two aspects. Firstly, the cycle and balance between animals, plants, and the natural environment are shown from the perspective of old Koskoosh. The rise of the sap, the bursting greenness of the willow bud, the fall of the yellow leaf. To enable the tree to sprout again the following year, the leaves sacrifice themselves to become nutrients, and this simple process embodies a small cycle. The old moose is surrounded and killed by wolves. Its sacrifice allows the moose herd to migrate successfully with minimal losses and reproduce offspring. In turn, the wolves obtain food to survive the harsh winter and raise their young. Moreover, animals rely on plants as a food source, while animal feces and such provide nutrients for plants. In the story, Jack London depicts the law of the jungle among animals and the replacement of plants, revealing the idea that animals and plants restrict and depend on each other to maintain ecological balance.

Secondly, as part of nature, humans also participate in the natural dynamic cycle. Koskoosh recalls the fate of a woman. After giving birth, she ages and her body weakens, just like a leaf turning from green to yellow. Once a famine strikes, she will be heartlessly abandoned, while her children will continue to multiply for the tribe. This is nature’s elimination of the weak to maintain balance. However, nature also eliminates the strong to maintain balance. Zing-ha, the smartest hunter in the tribe, eventually falls into an ice cave and dies. When he was finally discovered, half of his body had climbed out, but he was still firmly frozen to the ice surface, as if nature had reached out its claws to prevent his escape. A hunter who is too clever may hunt excessive amounts of food, thus disrupting the ecological balance. Therefore, Jack London’s description of Zing-ha’s death serves as a warning to humanity: do not use human intelligence to wantonly damage nature, or else one will be punished by nature.

In addition, Koskoosh also remembers that in prosperous years, women in the tribe give birth to many children, and food goes bad. Then, men start wars. In lean years, children starve to death, and the elderly are abandoned. The Native Americans consider themselves part of nature, not as conquerors or rulers. Their way of life aligns with the rhythms of nature. This reveals the interdependence and mutual restriction between human tribes and the natural environment: nature provides food for the tribe to survive, and the tribe conserves and protects natural resources through means such as waging wars to avoid irreversible damage to nature. Therefore, Jack London conveys the law of the survival of the fittest, through which he implies that all things in the world achieve a dynamic equilibrium as they progress through the cycle of birth, growth, aging, and death, and this very phenomenon represents the balanced beauty that is brought about by the inherent wholeness of nature.

3.2.2 Indian’s Obedience of the Holism of Nature

The Indian’s submission to the wholeness of nature is reflected in their profound understanding of the relationship between the individual and the whole. The tribe where old Koskoosh lives is a very ancient one. Before he was abandoned in the harsh winter, many other elderly tribesmen like him had already been left behind. When tribesmen reach a certain age and are no longer able to hunt to bring food to the tribe, they are abandoned. This seems to have become a traditional custom of the tribe. However, these abandoned elders also consider it reasonable. Their view of the relationship between the individual and the whole is just as old Koskoosh said: “Nature was not kindly to the flesh. She had no concern for that concrete thing called the individual. Her interest lay in the species, the race”. Nature controls the fate of all individuals. Old Koskoosh was “abandoned” by both the tribe and nature in his old age. Like a precariously hanging withered leaf, he finally faced death alone, demonstrating that an individual is unable to break away from the established laws of survival and the trajectory of fate within the context of nature and the group. Nevertheless, every individual is an indispensable part of the whole, jointly forming a complete ecosystem or tribal community. The existence of the tribe is supported by numerous individuals like Koskoosh. Their submission and inheritance have continued the tribe’s history, and the behaviors and experiences of individuals have converged into the tribe’s collective memory and culture.

Furthermore, individuals need to make sacrifices for the survival and continuation of the whole. When facing difficulties such as famine or long-distance migrations, the old woman and Koskoosh in the story were left behind because they couldn’t keep up with the group, ensuring the better survival of the entire tribe. Just like the solitary old moose and the

fallen leaves returning to the roots, this shows the helplessness and inevitability of individual interests giving way to the overall interests. The Native Americans are well aware of the fragility and impermanence of life. In the face of the power of nature and the changes of life, they show calmness and acceptance. The calmness of the Native American elder Koskoosh in the face of death, as well as the attitude of the people in the tribe towards life and death, indicates that they understand that only by sacrificing individuals to preserve the whole can they submit to and revere nature. This is determined by the wholeness of nature. As an element of nature, humanity is unable to resist.

4. Conclusion

Jack London's works are replete with ecological ideas, and when viewed from the perspective of ecological aesthetics, his natural ecological awareness in *The Law of Life* is vividly reflected in his profound grasp of the naturalness and wholeness that characterize nature. In this particular story, rather than devoting his efforts to depicting the industrial civilization of his era, he chooses to focus his creative energy on portraying the ecological beauty and the beauty of power that are inherently embedded within nature itself. This artistic choice of his serves as a powerful inspiration for people to turn their attention towards nature, for nature, in essence, is the sovereign ruler of the world, and human power pales into insignificance when juxtaposed with the might of nature. Furthermore, London showcases the harmonious manner in which the Indians coexist with nature, thereby demonstrating the balanced beauty that is an inherent part of nature. This serves as a poignant reminder that people should respect the integrity and wholeness of nature and come to the realization that humans are but an integral part of this vast natural ecosystem. It is imperative that humans prioritize the overall interests of nature and exercise restraint, refraining from causing damage to it in the pursuit of human self-interests. For failure to do so may very well lead to the eventual destruction of humanity itself. In conclusion, this article by Jack London contains certain anti-anthropocentric ideas, which, in the present era where the ecological crisis is escalating with each passing day, provide some valuable ideological guidance, pointing the way towards a more sustainable and harmonious relationship between humanity and nature.

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