The Call of the Wild
Concept Analysis: For 7th Grade


Brief Plot Summary:

Into the Primitive: Buck, a Saint Bernard-Scotch shepherd mix, lived the good life on Judge Miller’s ranch in the Santa Clara Valley until he was kidnapped by Manuel, a gardener’s assistant. Manuel shipped Buck north to become a sled dog in the Yukon Territories. In Seattle, Buck was purchased by Perrault and François who were couriers for the Canadian Government.

The Law of Club and Fang: During his first few days in the Yukon, Buck had to learn many lessons to survive under the frigid north’s unwritten “law of club and fang.” He learned how to pull a sled after François harnessed him between Dave and Spitz (the lead dog). Quickly he became more and more like his wild ancestors.

The Dominant Primordial Beast: Buck and Spitz finally fight. Buck killed Spitz as a ring of savage huskies looked on.

Who has Won the Mastership: Buck was placed as lead dog. The team was sold by a tearful Perrault and François to a “Scotch-half breed.” Under his direction, the team pulled a heavy load of mail back down the trail they had just traveled.

The Toil of Trace and Trail: Buck and the team were sold to Hal, Charles, and Mercedes—weak, inexperienced, and foolish greenhorns. Several of the new team dogs starved and the experienced dogs suffered horribly. When they reached John Thornton’s camp, Buck refused to go any farther. Watching together, Thornton and Buck witnessed the remaining members of the team and their foolish human drivers disappear into the black water as the ice gave way.

For the Love of a Man: Under Thornton’s loving care, Buck regained his strength. For the first time in his life, Buck experienced “love, genuine passionate love.”

The Sounding of the Call: After wandering in the wilderness and meeting a Timber wolf, Buck returned to camp to find that Yeehat Indians had massacred Thornton, Pete, Hans, and all of the dogs. Driven into a murderous rage, Buck killed several of the Yeehat party. With his master dead, he answers the call of the wild. He becomes the leader of the wolves and for many years afterward, the Yeehats told stories of the giant wolf-like creature that ruled a hidden valley that they were afraid to enter.

Organization Pattern:

*The Call of the Wild* is divided into 7 chapters, totaling 142 pages. This novel is unique because it is written from the Buck’s perspective—that of a dog. Through this point of view, the reader experiences new masters, other sled dogs, and the challenges of life in the Yukon as a sled dog would. Rather than focus on rising plot structure as most narratives, *The Call of the Wild* is
primarily a study in character development. The story relates Buck’s gradual progression from a
tame animal into a wild beast. Each chapter explores the theme of survival under intense
circumstances: Buck survives by channeling his wolfish instincts. By the end of the story, he is
the leader of a wild wolf pack.

Enduring Issue:

What does it take to survive? Jack London’s novel, *The Call of the Wild* is a story about survival.
In this book, harsh weather conditions, fierce competition, and bitter enemies tax Buck
physically and emotionally. From the time he leaves his home in California, he must rely on his
strength, cunning, and ancestral instincts to succeed in the Yukon. As Buck changes sled teams
and owners, he also observes how man has survived in this lifestyle. Some of his owners, like
Francois and Perrault, are tough yet gentle. They do not shy away from the hardships of life, yet
treat their dogs with respect and often sacrifice for the good of the team. Other owners, like Hal,
Charles, and Mercedes, are not smart or capable enough to survive. They, and the remains of
their team, perish in icy, arctic waters. Both man and beast must dig deep to defeat the odds in
this hard life.

Individuals today must survive the challenges around them. Middle school, family, peer pressure,
puberty, morality, self-esteem—students face all of these stressors and must conquer them to
survive adolescence. By exploring the issue of survival in this text, students can transfer this
theme to their own life experiences. As Buck survives, he changes. What changes must we adapt
to survive?

Issues Related to this Study of Literature:

Themes:

*Morality is a luxury:* Throughout the novel, London describes Buck’s descent from life as a
domesticated house dog into the “wild” untamed alpha wolf-hound he becomes. London
describes this transition as being “suddenly jerked from the heart of civilization and flung into
the heart of things primordial” (24). Buck must quickly learn the most basic laws of life in on the
trail: that of kill or be killed. It is the ultimate survival of the fittest. His initiation into this life
begins with the violent, sudden death of a mild-mannered dog named Curly that was sold with
him to the sled team. Because Curly was a weaker dog, she was attacked and killed by the others.
Buck learned to be strong, ruthless, and tough through this experience and others that shortly
followed.

Morality and this learned toughness often butt heads. Buck learned to stop looking after
the needs of others in order to maintain his own safety, but in turn watched his sled-mates suffer
and die. Instead of helping the weaker dogs, he focused only on his own needs. Buck lost loyalty
to anything but his own survival. In losing ties of friendship, Buck was seen as a wild thing,
savage, without conscience. In truth, Buck’s lack of so-called morality enabled him to leave the
other sled-dogs right before their death on the icy river, and also leave Thorton’s camp before the
Yeehat Indians attacked. His own survival came before the needs of anyone else.

*Obedience comes through respect, not force:* Through the story, Buck changes owners several
times. London makes a point of describing the authority each master displayed, and how their
styles differed. Clearly, Buck’s weakest owners were the American team of Hal, Mercedes, and Charles. Their laziness and incompetence drove them to death. Although they both whipped and begged the dogs to run, their performance suffered and Buck ended up refusing to move entirely. He received blows that almost killed him, yet would not obey. This choice saved his life, as the entire team soon perished.

In contrast, Buck had the strongest relationship with John Thorton, a man who won Buck’s obedience through respect. During their time together, Buck was able to perform incredible feats of strength, including pull a 1,000 pound sled by himself across town. He did this because of love for his master. This love, rooted in respect, fueled his behavior and brought obedience to even the most challenging of tasks. London uses this relationship to illustrate the contrast between obedience won by the whip or club, and obedience related to respect.

The individual vs. the community: The Call of the Wild makes a strong case for individuality. Although sled teams functioned as a community, using 9 dogs to pull together as one, Buck’s journey is incredibly personal, and he is the sole survivor. Many times, Buck’s decision to leave the team or rebel results in progress for him. After the death of Spitz, Buck refuses to allow the senior dog to pull in lead. He does not follow the community rule; instead choosing to fight until he is made team leader. This choice, among others, contributes to his success in the bitter Yukon.

As students study this novel, they may find themselves torn between the individual and the community. It is impossible to be part of this country today without involvement in the community: taxes, voting, social security numbers, church records, PTA, credit cards, and online accounts are just a few examples of how connected humans are with society and each other. Removing these things is not an option. Students may connect with Buck’s identity as part of a culture, but not really part of it, as they struggle to find who they truly are.

Power is the key to freedom: Although Buck is safe and comfortable in his California home, he has very little power in his life. Throughout The Call of the Wild, Buck slowly receives greater and greater freedom, correlating with more and more power. His freedom and power peak at the end of the novel, where he is the alpha leader of a wolf pack. He leads the team on his own, completely free from the demands of civilization. Although Buck’s journey is described as a descent into the primitive world, only there does he find the power to make his own decisions. He is owned by no one.

Setting:
The vast majority of The Call of the Wild takes place in the bitter terrain of the Yukon. The journey between the towns Dawson and Seattle is long, and the dogs travel this path many times with different owners. London describes conditions on the trail and in campsites, snow banks, the forest, and small towns. London describes in detail natural phenomenon including blizzards, the aurora borealis, and the breaking of frozen rivers. Students may not connect with this setting
immediately because they live in today’s modern, comfortable world. They will have to learn about the time period in the 1890s, why sled teams were used for travel, and life conditions in the Yukon. With this understanding, though, students will see that London’s setting is especially important to the story because it provides Buck’s most important challenge: survival in nature.

Point of View:

_The Call of the Wild_ remains a popular and memorable classic in part because of its unique point of view. The entire story is written through the eyes of Buck, a strong and burly Saint Bernard-Scotch mix. Because the story begins and ends in Buck’s perspective, the reader is rewarded with something special: parts of everyday life are wild and new. Buck’s first experience in snow, for example, is described in detail much richer than could be imagined with narration by a human. Most students will respond well to this technique—finding sympathy for Buck’s journey as well as moments of surprise and amusement.

Literary Terms from 7th Grade Core:

**Characterization:** Characterization: _The Call of the Wild_ includes 3 types of characters: men, dogs, and wolves. Each character has positive and negative traits; the animals are given anthropomorphic qualities so that they seem as sympathetic as any of the humans in the story. Buck is the only constant in this book, as dogs and owners change as quickly as he is sold. Students may become lost in the many minor characters that flit in and out of the story; therefore, some kind of character map or log may be helpful for them as they read.

**Character sketch:** As students read the novel, they will experience Buck’s character growth and development. It is vital that they recognize what plot points fuel such changes. A character map or diagram showing Buck’s personality traits, and evolution thereof, would be helpful for students to study him throughout the book. In this, they will learn what makes a good, round character. They can also contrast the information they are given about Buck with some of the flatter, minor character in the story that do not undergo character development.

**Conflict:** _The Call of the Wild_ is filled with violent, jarring events that may surprise or alarm readers. They must understand that the conflicts brought by death, pain, exposure, and disease are all part of why survival is key to this story. Without conflict, no novel or character is worth studying. Students must understand the conflict that makes a story good, as well as the conflicts that propel their own lives.

**Imagery:** Jack London portrays the bitter Yukon in bold shades of grey and white—depicting the snow and mud the dogs must slog through on their way. _The Call of the Wild_ is full of description, unleashing imagery to invoke emotion. Symbols such as snow, water, the color red, and the sun are used to portray messages about freedom, love, comfort, and hatred. The world London describes is two-fold—one physical, and the other figurative. Using imagery is an important tool in understanding the themes at play in this work.
**Tone:** The tone of *The Call of the Wild* is scientific, realist, and dry. The narrator has no personality or voice, neither is sympathetic to the deaths of the dogs or hardships along the way. The descriptions offered are factual, without coloring the reader’s experience of life on the trail. The tone offered is highly naturalistic—Darwinian, overall. Students will quickly recognize the differences between this novel and others written in the first person. The tone of this work matches its themes of toughness and rigor.

**Simile:** A few examples of simile are found in the work. One example includes, “Buck’s first day on the Dyea beach was like a nightmare” (24). Students can learn more about figures of speech through the novel including metaphors, repetition, assonance, and alliteration. Language Arts teachers could combine this book with a study in these figures of speech for a meaty lesson in both reading and writing.

**Affective Issues Related to *The Call of the Wild***:

**Loneliness:** Buck lacks any real connection with the dogs around him. He sees them as competition for team leader, and rarely interacts with them. Although Buck is often in the company of others, man and beast, he holds himself aloof from them, attached to no one. The one exception in his life is John Thorton, who he truly loves. Students may be puzzled by this behavior, as so much of their lives are driven by a need to connect. They may find it interesting to compare all the ways society today brings people together (carpool lane, facebook, match.com, group projects, etc.) with the solitude that Buck actively seeks.

**Friendship:** Buck’s only real friend is his owner John Thorton. Although two different species, they are able to communicate and form a strong bond together. Students may enjoy exploring how their friendship survived these obstacles, and transferring that to their own relationships.

**Home:** Buck finds his home in the wild forest of Northern Canada. Although this is not geographically where students want to be, they will relate to the concept of belonging, finding home, and being on their own. How do students thrive in their home environments? Is home a place or a feeling? Students will enjoy contrasting Buck’s experience with their own.

**Vocabulary Issues:**

*The Call of the Wild* is a very difficult novel for a seventh grade class because it offers a vocabulary filled with advanced, colloquial, and specific terms relative to the story. Some of the colloquialisms are relatively easy to explain. For example, students will understand the line “Dat spitz is one devil” (31) once they know the accent used transforms the word “that” into “dat.” Others include new words or phrases that will take longer to dissect. Each chapter contains between 15-30 words students may not have previously encountered. Before each of the 7 chapters, the class needs to explore some of the more difficult words, possibly through a word wall or vocabulary log. For this novel to be successful, teachers will have to introduce enough foreign words through vocabulary activities to promote fluency, but must be careful not to overwhelm kids with *too much*.

**Background Knowledge:**

Megan Straw  Brigham Young University  Dec 2011
Reading *The Call of the Wild* is quite challenging without a basic understanding of several aspects of background information that give the story context. Such items include:

- The history of the Klondike Gold Rush in Alaska
- Dog breeds, which fare best as sled dogs and why
- Geography: At least California, beginning in San Diego, part of Canada, and Alaska
- Culture of Alaskans, most specifically, how sled teams were used as transportation

Each of these topics play a crucial role in the story’s setting and provide meaning to plot and character details. Without understanding important background regarding *The Call of the Wild*, the central themes and issues that drive the novel are scattered and without foundation. The author Jack London spent some time in Alaska during the gold rush and his novel reflects details from that experience. Students would be well to study this material before beginning the novel, or they will quickly become disoriented and lost in unfamiliar language and situations.

**Implications for Students of Diversity:**

*The Call of the Wild* presents diversity in a unique lens: that of dog breeds. Students may prefer to discuss the topic of diversity in dogs because it is one step removed from human races and provides a small cushion so that students can participate and feel safe to share their ideas. In this story, Jack London presents many different breeds of dogs that face the same set of circumstances: bitter weather, harsh physical toil, sometimes cruel owners, and the test of sheer willpower. London shows, equally among the dog breeds, that the weaker, lazier dogs perish, and the stronger, more cunning dogs survive. It does not matter what breed the dog is, only that it quickly develops the skills and will to live. Several dogs die under the hands of Hal and Charles. These dogs starve and are worked to death. The surviving dogs are the ones who have been on the trail long enough to have built stamina and know how to guard their food.

Students will find it interesting to note that races in humans are scarcely mentioned in the novel, and that the worst team owners are a set of Americans. Studying the dog breeds instead provides a unique opportunity to explore the merit of a character based on its skills and desires, rather than the genetics it possesses.

**Gender Issues:**

London’s novel brims with masculinity, both in dogs and humans. The men are filled with loyalty, bravery, violence, strength, and ambition. The strongest relationship in this book is that of Buck and his owner John Thorton. Man and dog share the same goals and build off of each other’s strengths to succeed. Buck, in an impressive feat of strength, helps Thorton win enough money to search for a secret mine. Their masculinity is paramount. In contrast, very few females are mentioned in the story—only one with any dialogue. Her name is Mercedes, and she is the wife and sister of the inexperienced, clumsy team owners from the United States. Mercedes is selfish, shallow, and emotional. She hinders the team and cries when, at the point of exhaustion,
her wardrobe is sacrificed to lessen the load. Mercedes represents the weakness and stubbornness of humanity. Her femininity is a burden. Students may find *The Call of the Wild* difficult to read because of its harsh depiction of women. At best, females are absent. At worst, they are like Mercedes. *The Call of the Wild* takes place in the late 1800s and reflects the biased gender ideas of the time. London’s work is not a good source of balanced information regarding gender roles. Teachers must be sensitive to these issues and help students realize that the message of this story is not linked to a universal sermon about the role of women.

**Research Issues/Project Ideas:**

*Research Issues:* Any of the above-mentioned items in background research could be an excellent opportunity for students to gain a deeper understanding of the setting in *The Call of the Wild*. Additional research topics include:

- The design and history of sleds
- The life and writings of Jack London
- Rabies and its causes/treatments
- Pack behaviors of wolves and dogs

*Project Ideas:* Because *The Call of the Wild* is a character study, students would be well to work on projects that reflect the characters involved in the story. Some ideas include:

- Anthropomorphic diary entries of a pet or other animal
- Comparison of the book to movie of *The Call of the Wild*
- Interview dialogue of Buck, John Thornton, or other characters—include quotes from text
- Mini-sequel to the book that describes life in the wolf pack. What challenges do they face? What do they like to do?
- “A day in the life of a sled dog” exposé. Include facts about dogs and daily routine.
- Short narrative about how you would fare driving a sled team.

**Enrichment Resources:**

Several texts could be studied along *The Call of the Wild* to teach the theme of survival.

**Young Adult Literature:**

- *The Hunger Games*, by Susan Collins: A popular series that portrays teenagers surviving each other in a gladiator-style death Olympics.
- *The Hatchet*, by Gary Paulson: Classic novel that describes a boy’s time lost in the wilderness after a plane crash.

**Short Stories:**

- “The Most Dangerous Game,” by Richard Connell: When a man is hunted, what will he do to survive?
- “To Start a Fire,” by Jack London; describes a tragic hike in the bitter cold.

**Internet Sites:**
  Three stories of children who survived the Holocaust.
• “Survival: Discovery Channel”: http://dsc.discovery.com/survival/
  An interactive site that allows students to explore wilderness survival techniques.
• “Aaron Ralston’s Story”:
• “How to Survive (Almost) Anything: 14 Survival Skills”:
  http://theboldcorsicanflame.wordpress.com/2010/09/25/2-articles-how-to-survive-almost-
  anything-14-survival-skills-and-a-survival-list/ Informative article on basic survival.

Poems/Songs:
• “The Song of Wandering Aengus” by W.B. Yeats: A man finds his home in the woods.
• “Love is a Battlefield” by Pat Benatar: All is fair in love and war. Right?
• “I Will Survive” by Gloria Gaynor: Surviving a broken heart is just as difficult as being a sled dog, it seems.

Film Adaptations:
• *The Call of the Wild*: 1935, starring Clark Gable/Loretta Young
• *The Call of the Wild*: 1972, starring Charlton Heston
• *The Call of the Wild (TV)*: 1993, starring Rick Schroder
• *What a Nightmare, Charlie Brown!* (TV special): 1978, Snoopy becomes a sled dog.