

Jack London and Naturalism

Naturalism is the style of fiction in which characters are forged by their environment. First introduced by the French writer Émile Zola in the 1880's, Naturalism, an extension of Realism, was a reaction to the tenets of Romanticism, which idealized emotion and adventure. While Realism attempts to depict characters and their situations as truthfully as possible, Naturalism moves beyond realistic description to also address the psychological and evolutionary forces that contribute to a character's decision making. Characters must confront their limitations and adapt in a world that can be violent, powerful, and destructive.

At the close of the 19th Century, the typical setting for a novel might be a posh drawing room, pastoral farm, or gruesome battlefield. The ruthless wilderness of the Klondike was as unexplored in fiction as it was in reality. When Jack London began publishing stories from the Great White North like *The Son of the Wolf* (1900), *The Daughter of the Snows* (1902), *The Call of the Wild* (1903), and *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), his strong, vivid prose brought the harsh living and hard decisions of the frontier into the imaginations of American readers.

Hardships in nature force London's characters to be flexible and resourceful in order to survive—and sometimes, fail. Often rejecting civilization in order to follow an inner intuition, characters like Buck function within Charles Darwin's construct of survival of the fittest—a model made clear by the

jockeying for dominance displayed by Buck, Dave, Sol-leks, and Spitz. London's talent for Naturalism is evident in his unsentimental view of his canine protagonist. Sara S. Hodson, Curator of Literary Manuscripts at the Huntington Library, notes that in choosing to tell the story through a dog's point of view, London could have "skated very closely to anthropomorphism, but he never crosses the line. This is one of his crowning achievements: to put you inside the mind of a dog and make it so realistic and have it ring so clear and so truthfully without ever crossing into caricature."

The landscape of the Klondike shaped the destiny of all those who entered it, some leaving as Klondike Kings, others heartbroken and penniless, or still more perishing along the pass. London left the Klondike in 1898 and by the time of his death in 1916, he was one of America's highest paid writers. His Naturalist writings were not restricted to tales of the Gold Rush. His semi-autobiographical works such as *The Road* and *The People of the Abyss* exposed issues of poverty and abuses of power. His work influenced a generation of American Naturalists including Upton Sinclair and Sinclair Lewis, who continued to apply Naturalist theory to social issues in hopes of reform. Like London, they aspired to tell authentic stories about the realities of American society, from the bustling city to the farthest reaches of the Western terrain.