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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Book

Profound questions raised by the story allow the character (and the reader) to explore the meaning of human life and extract themes. Themes investigate topics explored for centuries by philosophers, politicians, scientists, historians, and theologians. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, personal moral code in relation to political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational commitments. A work of fiction can shed light on these age-old debates by creating new situations to challenge and explore human nature.

Discussion Activities

There are many themes in *The Call of the Wild*, but none as central as the tension between Nature and Civilization. Ask your students to discuss the various ways this complex theme is revealed.

Buck ultimately struggles between his love for his master, John Thornton, and the enigmatic call of his ancestors. Ask students to find specific moments when this call captivates Buck. Use this passage from Chapter 6 to begin your discussion: “Deep in the forest a call was sounding, and as often as he heard this call, mysteriously thrilling and luring, he felt compelled to turn his back upon the fire and the beaten earth around it, and to plunge into the forest [...] but [...] the love for John Thornton drew him back to the fire again.” How does this passage describe an archetypal human conflict?

Writing Exercise

The Call of the Wild opens with a four-line epigraph from “Atavism,” a poem by John Myers O’Hara, published in 1902. Jack London wrote to O’Hara in 1907: “I ran across those lines from your poem ‘Atavism,’ in a detached fragment. Never knew who wrote them, and never knew the rest of the poem. Won’t you PLEASE send me the whole poem? Of all the poetry I know, there were no four lines within a hundred million miles as appropriate for the key to *The Call of the Wild* as were those four lines of yours that I used.” Do you agree or disagree that these lines articulate a major theme of the novel?

Homework

Begin working on essays, choosing one of the Essay Topics in this guide. Outlines are due at the next class.