

# The Call of the Wild



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JACK LONDON

Jack London was born out of wedlock in 1876 to Flora Wellman Chaney. Young Jack took his stepfather's surname, London, when Flora married later that year. Jack spent his youth traveling around California with his family, where he developed a taste for adventure. He worked in a cannery, hunted for oysters in San Francisco bay, traveled across the United States, and sailed around the Pacific, all before graduating from high school at age 19. London attended the University of California Berkeley for one semester, before dropping out to seek out his fortune in the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897. London lasted a year in the Yukon, but returned to California with a wealth of material for his stories, among them *The Call of the Wild*, which became his most famous work. London also was an advocate of the rights of workers, unionization, and socialism, and wrote a number of novels on those topics. During his adventures, London picked up many diseases the left him in deep pain and also contributed to his growing alcoholism. Nonetheless, he continued publishing his writing in periodicals, thrilling his readers with adventure stories until his death in 1916. He died by an overdose of morphine, which he was taking to ward off the pain of his diseases, and there is some debate about whether his death was accidental or a suicide.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

London culled much of his inspiration for *The Call of the Wild* directly from his experiences in the Klondike during the Gold Rush of 1897. London, like many hopeful prospectors, traveled to the Klondike in search of riches and adventure. However, greater socioeconomic factors were at work in this massive movement of nearly 100,000 people heading into the far north. Economic depression from the Panic of 1893 drove many people to quit their jobs or sell their homes to take up gold mining. About 30,000 made it the Klondike, and only about 4,000 struck gold. Life in Yukon was difficult, plagued by murders, suicides, disease, and starvation. London himself had to turn back when he contracted scurvy. Such low odds of success, or survival, informed London's belief that the environment determined the course of one's life. This idea, known as "environmental determinism," reoccurs throughout London's writings.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

When 21-year-old Jack London embarked to the Klondike in search of gold, he took Milton's [Paradise Lost](#) and Darwin's *On*

*the Origin of the Species* with him. In *The Call of the Wild*, London wrestles with Milton's concept of free will through Buck, whose fate primarily remains in the hands of his human owners and the conditions on the trail. London also embraces Darwinian concepts, such as "survival of the fittest," natural selection, and adaption in Buck's story. He portrays Buck as the master survivalist, who overcomes every obstacle by following his instincts and adapting to his environment. Buck's characterization as "masterful" resembles the superman theory of Friedrich Nietzsche, which argued that certain humans possess a "will to power." Like humans, Buck possesses a desire to dominate. Originally intended as a companion piece to *The Call of the Wild*, London's [White Fang](#), is a foil to *The Call of Wild* through its depiction of a wild dog's domestication into a loving and loyal pet.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Call of the Wild*
- **When Written:** 1903
- **Where Written:** California
- **When Published:** 1903
- **Literary Period:** Naturalism
- **Genre:** Adventure novel
- **Setting:** The late 1890s in Santa Clara, CA, briefly; then Alaska and the Canadian Klondike during the gold rush.
- **Climax:** Buck killing the Yeehats to avenge John Thornton's murder.
- **Point of View:** Third-person limited narrator, who narrates from Buck's perspective

### EXTRA CREDIT

**A Darwinist designer.** London was an avid Darwinist. In 1905 he purchased a ranch in Glen Ellen, California to develop farming techniques based on Darwin's theories.

**A dog lover.** London fought for custody of his husky, Brown Wolf, from his first wife, Bessie Maddern.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Buck, a proud and strong St. Bernard mix, lives a princely existence on Judge Miller's estate in Santa Clara. Living an insular life, he has no idea that the discovery of gold in the Klondike has created a demand for dogs like him. Manuel, a gardener on the estate desperate for money, kidnaps Buck, selling him to a dog trader. The man throws Buck into a crate on

a train headed north.

Four days later Buck's crate is unloaded from the train. At first chance, he leaps out, attacking a man in a red sweater. The man stuns Buck with his **club**, beating him into submission, until Buck learns to obey. Buck spends his days watching other dogs suffer the same treatment, until two Canadian couriers, François and Perrault, purchase him, Curly, Dave, and Spitz for their sled dog team. They sail on *The Narwhal* to Dyea, Alaska, where Buck encounters snow for the first time.

Within hours of making landfall, Buck sees Curly attacked by a husky, then trampled by the rest of the sled dogs. Her death teaches Buck a valuable lesson about **the law of club and fang**. He learns to always strive for his survival by never letting his guard down. Buck's lessons continue on the trail, where François harnesses him to **the traces** for the first time. Under the tutelage of Perrault and the dogs Spitz and Dave, Buck transforms into a working sled dog. He learns not only from their experience, but also from the wild instincts awakening within him.

Mastering his ability to scavenge, steal, and fight, Buck's desire to dominate the sled dog team increases, and his rivalry with the lead dog, Spitz, intensifies. Yet conditions on the trail postpone their imminent showdown. A pack of mad huskies attack the camp, Dolly subsequently goes mad from rabies, and the team struggles crossing treacherous stretches of thin ice. Buck also instigates a mutiny among the weaker dogs. One night, while Buck leads the team on a rabbit hunt, Spitz makes his attack. The rivals spar for supremacy of the pack, but Buck manages to break Spitz's leg, claiming victory.

Buck becomes a masterful leader, making record runs across the Klondike. Yet demands for more mail force François and Perrault to hand over Buck and his team to a Scottish courier, who wears them down with heavy mail loads. On the trail, Dave falls ill, compelling the Scotsman to shoot him out of mercy. Exhausted from this journey, the team is handed over to Hal, Charles, and Mercedes, American fortune seekers, who mistreat Buck and his team terribly. They force them to toil under dense loads, starve them, and beat them incessantly.

Barely alive, Buck's team arrives at White River, where the ice is starting to melt. A local camper, John Thornton warns Hal against crossing, but Hal belligerently beats his animals into moving forward. Buck, sensing danger, refuses to rise. Hal, incensed, beats Buck with his club. Thornton tackles Hal and cuts Buck out of the traces, saving him from the brink of death. Hal, humiliated, proceeds towards the riverbank, while Buck and Thornton watch the sled fade into the distance and suddenly drop beneath the ice.

As Buck recuperates under Thornton's care, he develops a deep affection and loyalty for his "ideal master." Buck demonstrates his devotion for Thornton many times over, defending him in a bar fight, saving him from drowning, and

winning a \$1600 bet for him by pulling a sled loaded with one thousand pounds.

With the winnings, Thornton takes Buck deeper into the Klondike in search of a lost mine. While Thornton pans for gold, Buck, haunted by visions of a **caveman** and the wild's beckoning **call**, explores the forest. He runs with a timber wolf and hunts prey on his own, but returns to Thornton's campsite when he senses that a catastrophe has occurred.

Seeing the Yeehats dance over the ruins of the camp confirms Buck's suspicions that they have murdered Thornton. Driven by rage, he launches into an attack, killing the chief and overturning **the law of club and fang**. Buck answers the **call** when a wolf pack initiates him into their ranks. He runs with them, eventually becoming their leader and a legend.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Buck** – A one hundred and forty pound, half St. Bernard, half Scotch shepherd mix, Buck is a proud, strong, and intelligent creature. After being kidnapped from his home in Santa Clara, California, he becomes a powerful sled dog in the Canadian Klondike. As Buck goes deeper into the wilderness, he transforms from a pampered pet into a fierce animal, who ultimately masters the ways of the wild and his own fate.

**John Thornton** – An experienced gold miner and outdoorsman, John Thornton is Buck's final owner and his ideal master. Thornton takes ownership of Buck when he saves him from Hal's brutal beating at White River. Thornton takes Buck deep into the uncharted Yukon in search of gold. They develop a deep and loving companionship.

**François** – An experienced and "swarthy" French-Canadian "half-breed," François is a courier for the Canadian government, who teaches Buck to become a working dog. François and his sledding partner, Perrault, are wise and just masters. Not only are they skillful sledsman, they handle their dogs with respect—disciplining, feeding, and protecting them according to the circumstances of the wild. François' speech is heavily accented, which London denotes in the phonetic spelling of his dialogue.

**Hal** – An American settler, Hal comes to the Klondike in search of gold and adventure with his sister, Mercedes, and her husband, Charles. Along with his relatives, he acquires Buck's sled dog team and adds six dogs to create a massive sled dog team of fourteen. Hal is an incompetent and cruel master who harshly beats his animals with clubs and whips, treating them like slaves.

**Dave** – A dog and an "experienced wheeler" on the mail run sled dog team, he instructs Buck in how to be a sled dog. Dave has an unaggressive, solitary, and brooding manner, but his

main characteristic is his unwavering devotion to his work in **the traces**. He becomes ill on the trail to Dawson and is shot out of mercy by the Scotch half-breed.

**The man in the red sweater** – This dog trader and trainer beats Buck into submission following his release from a cage-like crate. By continually beating Buck with a club until he is subdued, the man in the red sweater teaches Buck to obey his masters, but not to "conciliate" to them. He is associated with the power of the **club**.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Spitz** – Buck's rival for supremacy on François and Perrault's sled dog team. Spitz is not only an experienced sled dog, who has traveled throughout the Northland, but he is a ruthless and cunning animal who will do anything to preserve his power.

**Perrault** – Also a French-Canadian mail driver, he is François' sledding partner. Along with François, he educates Buck in becoming a sled dog. Like François, he is portrayed as a just and fair master, whose speech is heavily accented.

**Judge Miller** – Buck's original owner, he owns the Santa Clara estate in California where Buck grows up and from which Buck is kidnapped. He is associated with the Southland, civilization, and its laws.

**Mercedes** – Hal's sister and Charles' wife, she is a selfish and materialistic woman disposed towards hysteria.

**Charles** – Like his wife Mercedes and brother-in-law Hal, he is an incompetent sledsman, disposed towards quarrelling and folly.

**Curly** – A friendly she-dog, whom Buck befriends early on, her life is cut short viciously when she naively approaches a larger husky, who rips her to shreds. Her death warns Buck of the savagery **of the law of club and fang**.

**Dolly** – A she-dog who dies of madness, (rabies), on the trail.

**Sol-leks** – A one-eyed dog whose name means "Angry One." A solemn and moody animal, he does not like being approached on his blind side.

**Billee and Joe** – Two huskies Perrault acquires on the trail.

**Manuel** – A gardener at Judge Miller's Santa Clara estate, he kidnaps and sells Buck to an unnamed dog trader in order to pay off his gambling debts and support his large family.

**The Scotch half-breed** – A courier of Scottish descent, he takes Buck and his team on a long and heavy mail delivery run. He shoots Dave to save him from a long and painful. Later, he sells Buck and his team to Hal, Charles, and Mercedes.

**The Outsides** – The six dogs that Hal acquires, including three short-haired pointers, a Newfoundland, and two "mongrels."

**The Insides** – The remaining dogs of François and Perrault's sled team, who are sold to Hal. They include, Buck, Sol-leks, Billee, Joe, Koon, Teek, and Pike.

**Pike** – The "clever malingerer" of François and Perrault's sled team, who teaches Buck how to steal.

**Teek and Koon** – Two huskies acquired by François.

**Skeet and Nig** – Two of John Thornton's dogs.

**Hans and Pete** – John Thornton's travel companions.

**Timber Wolf** – The wild wolf that invites Buck into the woods.

**"Black" Burton** – A man whom Buck attacks while defending John Thornton in the bar at Circle City.

**O'Brien** – John Thornton's friend from whom he borrows money to cover Matthewson's wager.

**Matthewson** – The rich prospector who bets against John Thornton that Buck can't pull a one thousand pound sled load.

**The Yeehats** – The tribe of Indians that murder Thornton and ravage his camp. Buck kills them in retribution for Thornton's death.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### THE MAN-DOG RELATIONSHIP

In the harsh Klondike, man and sled dog develop intense bonds, coming to depend on each other in symbiotic ways in order to survive. For instance, sled dogs, like Buck provide transportation and labor to couriers like François and Perrault, who in turn care for their animals with food and protection. London portrays such bonds by demonstrating how Buck's owners shape his character and educate him in the ways of mastery.

At Judge Miller's insular estate Buck is a prized and pampered pet, allowed to have the run of the place as a glorified guard dog, who ceremoniously lies by the Judge's feet and accompanies his grandchildren on little hunting trips. Under François and Perrault's just and wise care, Buck becomes an exemplary working dog and fierce leader. Through John Thornton's love and respect, Buck transforms into a loyal companion.

That Buck changes so thoroughly under these human owners highlights not only the diversity of man-dog relationships, but also its evolutionary nature. For London, the kinship between man and dog is ever-changing, but also primeval, stretching back to the ancient times when caveman first hunted with wild wolves. It is also a relationship fraught by a deep-seated struggle "to master, or be mastered." While men seek to domesticate Buck by shaping his identity, Buck struggles to

reconcile his inner instincts with his devotion for his "ideal master," John Thornton. This struggle for dominance is, for London, the crux of the man-dog relationship. It is a kinship that can be "ideal" through mutual love, respect, and justness, but because it has evolved into various symbiotic partnerships, it can hardly ever live up to its primeval legacy in which man and beast walk as co-dependent, but also autonomous equals.



### THE PURSUIT OF MASTERY

The dog eat dog world of the Klondike awakens within Buck a "dominant primordial beast" that drives him to "master, or be mastered." Buck chooses "to master" by overthrowing Spitz and asserting his rightful place as lead dog on François and Perrault's team. Domination is Buck's aim and he achieves it. Mastery, however, is not just a relentless struggle for power and dominance. London describes Buck's pursuit "to master" as a learning process. Buck "masters," or comes to dominate his fellow dogs by learning, or mastering, survival skills. He "receives instruction" from the other sled dogs about how to work in the traces and learns "lessons," like burying himself in the snow to keep warm, or deferring to man's authority when that man wields a heavy club.

The pursuit of mastery is not just limited to the canine world; it's active in the human one, as well. Buck's human owners parallel Buck's drive to dominate through their attempts to tame the wild, both animals and nature, alike. Buck's various owners exert mastery over canines by exchanging these animals like commodities, disciplining them and charting their course across the Klondike. Meanwhile, miners, such as John Thornton, carve through the earth so that they can harvest gold, while pioneers such as Hal, Charles, and Mercedes try to settle the Klondike by imposing their worldly possessions upon it.

Man's will "to master" nature stifles Buck's own innate drive to dominate. While Buck masters other dogs, *man masters him*. Buck is not able to fully assert his mastery until he flagrantly defies **the law of club and fang** by attacking the Yeehats. In doing so, Buck willfully overturns man's dominance over dog, but also gains autonomy. Free from man's mastery, he is able to roam nature freely as the leader of a wild wolf pack. Buck has not only mastered the ways of the wild, but his own fate.



### WILD LAW AND ORDER

When Jack London embarked to the Klondike in search of gold, he brought two seminal works with him, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species*. The latter's influence is evidenced by the ways in which nature administers the law. When Buck attacks a man to defend John Thornton, the miners set up a mock court to settle this dispute on the frontier. That they set

up their own councils demonstrates a different kind of justice at work in the Northland.

While "moral consideration" and reason operate in the Judge's courthouse in the Southland, Darwinian tenets, such as "survival of the fittest," natural selection, and adaptation are actively enforced in London's Klondike. For example, most deaths in *The Call of the Wild* occur because the victim could not adapt to his/her environment. The dogs that Hal, Charles, and Mercedes acquire for their sled dog team are ill suited for work in the traces and for the Klondike's harsh environment, so they die. Similarly, Hal, Charles, and Mercedes perish because they cannot adapt to life in the Northland. Mercedes cannot part from her possessions, while Hal and Charles do not have the wherewithal to execute a successful trip across the Yukon, nor do they listen to the advice of experienced settlers, who warn them against traveling on thin ice. Consequently, Hal's ignorance leads his team to a treacherous patch of thin ice, while Mercedes' heavy articles weigh down the sled, causing the ice to cave beneath them. Because they do not adapt to nature's ways, they are neither fit, nor selected to survive.

In contrast, Buck excels and survives in the wild because he follows his instincts. Such distinctions underline the harsh and brutal character of nature's laws, which are codified in **the law of club and fang**—wild justice is served when the most adaptive survive, the strong thrive, the weak die, and those who disrespect nature's laws suffer nature's wrath. This order is reflected in the way that the sled dog team operates, like an organism within an ecosystem. The sled dog team is healthy and thrives in the wild under the direction of respectful owners like François and Perrault, but suffers under poor masters like Hal, Charles, and Mercedes. Similarly, the dogs work best in the traces when every dog knows his place within the natural order, but falls into some disorder when Buck upsets this balance by overthrowing Spitz. However, Buck is able to restore order on the team when he takes over because he knows how to play by nature's rules.



### DOMESTICATION TO DEVOLUTION

While Buck is deeply influenced by his human masters, *The Call of the Wild* is ultimately about Buck's transformation from a domesticated dog to a wild wolf. London's Darwinian influences are at work in Buck's "development," or rather his gradual "retrogression" into a primeval beast. Like an evolving organism, Buck sheds characteristics ill-suited to his environment and takes advantage of traits that help him thrive. He tunes in to his latent, feral instincts, becoming less pet-like and more wolf-like—his soft paws toughen for icy conditions, his body strengthens for work in the traces, he gains endurance against the pain of the club and the lash of the whip, and his bloodlust for live prey increases.

As Buck physically devolves, his memory recedes into a primordial past, where he actively envisions hunting and scavenging with a caveman. This primeval vision is realized when Buck satisfies his deep desire to kill a bull moose on his own. In this way, Buck not only acts like a wolf, but thinks like a wolf, as well. Buck's devolution completes itself when he joins with his timber wolf "brethren" at the novel's conclusion. He not only becomes their leader, but fathers many wolves, who bear his traits, thereby cementing his place in the wild wolves' lineage.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### THE LAW OF CLUB AND FANG

**The law of club and fang** refers to the primitive law of nature that reigns in the Northland, which rules according to the necessities of survival in reference to both dog's relation to man and to other dogs. We see the two parts of this law in action through particular devices: the man in the red sweater's club and the dog fangs that rip Curly to shreds. Through powerful blows the man in the red sweater's club teaches dogs, like Buck, to obey their masters. Meanwhile, the dogs' attack on Curly symbolizes the power of the fang. Together, the law of club and the law of fang prescribes a code for survival in the Northland—obey man's club, never let your guard down, and fight to win.



### THE TRACES

**The traces**, which bind the sled dogs to their sleds, represent labor and service, pride in one's work, and the social hierarchy of the sled dog team. Under the traces' binding grip, Buck transforms from a pet into a working dog. He learns and earns his place through his labor in the traces. However, the sled dog's traces don't just bind canines into steadfast servitude. They also reflect the working order of the entire sled dog team. A dog's position in the traces dictates his place in the team's canine hierarchy. For instance, Spitz is the dominant, alpha male of the pack, so he is harnessed at the head of the team. When Buck overthrows Spitz, he assumes Spitz's place in the traces, symbolizing his leadership and authority over the other dogs.



### THE SOUTHLAND V. THE NORTHLAND

The Southland refers to California, specifically the Santa Clara Valley where Buck grows up. The Northland refers

to the Alaska and the Klondike in the Canadian Yukon, where Buck comes of age. Together, they symbolize the dramatic contrast between the rules of civilization and laws of nature. The Southland is governed by the "law of love and fellowship." "Moral consideration" underlies this law. The Northland's governance operates under the **law of club and fang**. On the surface, the South seems more orderly, while the North seems lawless, but London reminds us that each region codifies its laws according to its environment. The Southland, being a more developed and hospitable region, can enforce laws that rely on a strong moral compass. "Mercy was a thing reserved for gentler climes," London notes. In contrast, the Northland, being a wild frontier, must rely on more primitive mandates in order to administer "just" laws.



### CAVEMAN VISIONS

As Buck transforms over time into a wild dog, his visions of the caveman strengthen. The caveman represents dog's primordial master, but also alludes to Buck's yearning for his primeval past. In his final vision, Buck and the caveman hunt and scavenge in unison, symbolizing the perfect harmony of man and beast in the wild. It is a relationship that is pure and untainted, but also ancient and foregone. The ephemeral and dreamlike nature of Buck's encounters with his primordial master signal the irretrievable quality of this forgotten past.



### THE CALL

**The call** is a wild force that beckons Buck to immerse himself in nature. Though not represented by any single object, it is an energy often associated with songs and wolf howls. "Ancient song" and "song of the pack" are a few examples. The musical quality of "the call" underlines its ability speak to the primal, instinctual, and emotional aspects of Buck's character, suggesting that it is not just an alluring voice, but a powerful summoning.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Publications edition of *The Call of the Wild* published in 1990.

### Chapter 1 Quotes

●● Old longings nomadic leap,  
Chafing at custom's chain;  
Again from its brumal sleep  
Wakens the ferine strain.

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 1

### Explanation and Analysis

The epigraph is from a John O'Hara poem, in which O'Hara praises the wild for awakening long-dormant instincts in the consciousness. The poem suggests that all beings, whether they're "civilized" or not, have a fundamental longing for action and adventure--a longing that's repressed because of the influence of "custom." And yet the instinct for action and wildness (becoming feral, or "ferine") can be awakened suddenly and unexpectedly from its "brumal" (wintry) sleep. As we'll see, the poem is the perfect epigraph for London's novel. Just as one's primal instincts can be awoken by sudden, unexpected events, Buck is roused from his luxurious lifestyle by a sudden kidnapping that awakens his primal, wolfish instincts. Like the poem's progression, the novel itself is essentially Buck's transition from a dog of "custom" to one that is "ferine."

●● During the four years since his puppyhood he had lived the life of a sated aristocrat; he had a fine pride in himself, was even a trifle egotistical, as a country gentleman sometimes become because of their insular situation. But he had saved himself by not becoming a mere pampered house-dog.

**Related Characters:** Buck

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 2

### Explanation and Analysis

London establishes that Buck's life is idle and easygoing--he has little to do, no food to earn. His master, a prominent judge, is gentle and prosperous, so Buck is well-treated and well-fed.

Throughout the novel, London will draw comparisons between Buck the dog and human beings. Here, for instance, London compares Buck to an aristocrat, and the comparison is more insightful than it might seem at first. Like the aristocrats of Europe, Buck has a long, warlike past--the aristocrats, after all, used to be loyal soldiers of the king, but in recent centuries, they've allowed their luxurious lifestyles to suppress their talents for war. Buck, by the same token, is a dog, meaning that he's a descendant of wild, savage wolves. Buck has the instincts for violence

and fighting, but because he's lived in luxury, his instincts have been mostly suppressed.

●● He was beaten (he knew that); but he was not broken. He saw once for all, that he stood no chance against a man with a club. He learned the lesson, and in all his after life he never forgot it. That club was a revelation. It was his introduction to the reign of primitive law. Again and again, as he looked at each brutal performance, the lesson was driven home to Buck: a man with a club was a lawgiver, a master to be obeyed, though not necessarily conciliated.

**Related Characters:** Buck, The man in the red sweater

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 6

### Explanation and Analysis

Buck has been kidnapped unexpectedly, and his new owners beat him with a heavy club, causing Buck great pain. Buck, who's been treated well for his entire life, isn't the least bit used to such acts of violence--he's literally never experienced them before.

The passage is important because it establishes the supremacy of violence and survival in the novel. The simple fact is that life (particularly in the Northland) is hard and full of pain--the only question, at least for Buck, is whether or not Buck will be able to overcome the pain and survive. London paints a harsh, Darwinian picture of the world, in which the strong (those who control the club) control the weak (Buck, who's been captured). Buck must learn to become more powerful and control his own environment--or he'll be killed.

●● "Well, Buck, my boy," he went on in a genial voice, "we've had our little ruction, and the best thing we can do is to let it go at that. You've learned your place, and I know mine. Be a good dog and all 'll go well and the goose hang high. Be a bad dog, and I'll whale the stuffin' outa you. Understand?"

**Related Characters:** The man in the red sweater (speaker), Buck

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** **Page Number:** 6**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, the man who beats Buck expresses the basic law of survival that London has just shown us. The man has beaten Buck with a heavy club because Buck was being disobedient--Buck had just been kidnapped from his old home, and wasn't used to his new, harsh owners.

In essence, Buck has been living in a soft, dreamy world--a world in which there's infinite food and plentiful company. The real world, which Buck is just about to discover, is wild, dangerous, and full of violence. Buck has just discovered the basic law of the real world: know your place, or you'll be attacked for getting out of line. Buck, as a dog in a world of men, must learn to be obedient to his masters, or risk being beaten again.

One reason that London's novel--a novel about a dog--feels mature and insightful, rather than childish, is that London thinks that, on the most basic level, there's no difference between a dog and a human being. Both are just animals, trying to survive by adapting to their surroundings. Even a dog knows the law of the club--one must either master or be mastered.

**Chapter 2 Quotes**

●● He had been suddenly jerked from the heart of civilization and flung into the heart of things primordial. No lazy, sun-kissed life was this, with nothing to do but loaf and be bored. Here was neither peace, nor rest, nor a moment's safety. All was confusion and action, and every moment life and limb were in peril. There was imperative need to be constantly alert; for these dogs and men were not town dogs and men. They were savages, all of them, who knew no law but the law of club and fang.

**Related Characters:** Buck**Related Themes:**  **Related Symbols:**  **Page Number:** 8**Explanation and Analysis**

At the beginning of Chapter 2, London clarifies everything that's happened to Buck in Chapter 1: Buck has been ripped

away from his old life in California--he can longer count on food or shelter. Instead, Buck has to adapt to his new, chaotic surroundings, finding the best way to obey the "law of club and fang."

The law of club and fang is, in essence, London's interpretation of survival of the fittest. All beings in the universe are competing with each other for food and shelter--the difference is that some animals (humans, dogs) are less aware of the competition than others. In his new environment, Buck is suddenly made aware of the laws of the universe, and adapts accordingly.

Here London also contrasts town with nature, the "Southland" (California) with the "Northland" (Alaska). Because of their drastically differing environments, it's suggested, even the very morals of each place are different. In the South, there is enough warmth and food to indulge in "luxuries" like boredom, compassion, or fun. In the North, however, one must be "savage" in order to survive.

●● So that was the way. No fair play. Once down, that was the end of you.

**Related Characters:** Buck, Curly**Related Themes:** **Page Number:** 9**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, a dog named Curly approaches another dog in an attempt to be friendly. Instead of responding with friendliness, the dog attacks Curly and kills her. In this way, Buck learns one basic lesson of his new environment: there's no more politeness, no more fair play. Dogs who step out of line for any reason--even their own kindness--end up dead. Buck has lived in a world where kindness and gentleness was celebrated, but now he's come to the opposite kind of environment, where hard work and toughness are paramount. (Notice that the dog who's killed in this scene is a female, suggesting that the "real world" might be easier for males, with their supposedly more violent and aggressive instincts--a common, though inaccurate interpretation of Darwin's "survival of the fittest.")

●● Buck had been purposefully placed between Dave and Sol-leks so that he might receive instruction. Apt scholar that he was, they were equally apt teachers, never allowing him to linger long in error, and enforcing their teaching with their sharp teeth. And ere the day was done, so well had he mastered his work.

**Related Characters:** Buck, Sol-leks, Dave

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 12

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Buck learns how to be a sled dog. He's taken through a crash course in running, pulling, and turning--and surprisingly, he turns out to be an excellent student, quickly mastering the basic lessons he's taught.

It's worth noting that Buck learns his lessons quickly because he's taught by Dave, an experienced dog who bites and barks whenever Buck messes up. London anticipates the psychology of "negative reinforcement" and B.F. Skinner's conditioning treatments--the best way to learn, as far as he's concerned, is through the threat of pain. Sure enough, Buck masters his skills in less than a day, thanks--it's implied--to Dave and Sol-leks.

●● This first theft marked Buck as fit to survive in the hostile Northland environment. It marked his adaptability, his capacity to adjust himself to changing conditions, the lack of which would have meant swift and terrible death.

**Related Characters:** Buck

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 13

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Buck learns how to survive in the harsh new environment in which he finds himself. Buck doesn't get much food, so he has to steal other dogs' food in order to survive. Buck quickly learns that he's good at stealing without getting caught--as a result, he survives the harsh Northland instead of slowly starving to death.

London's observations about dogs might just seem like good writing, but they also contain some important insights that

could be applied to human society, too. London was a committed socialist, who believed that society was wrong to punish thieves and robbers so harshly. Thieves, he maintained, weren't immoral people--they were just trying to feed themselves and survive poverty. The only true morality in life, London believed, was the law of survival. London doesn't judge Buck for thieving--just as he didn't judge thieves--instead, he seems glad that Buck is asserting his will and surviving.

●● And not only did he learn by experience, but instincts long dead became alive again. The domesticated generations fell from him. In vague ways he remembered back to the youth of the breed to the time the wild dogs ranged in packs through the primeval forest and killed their meat as they ran it down. Thus, as a token of what a puppet thing life is, the ancient song surged through him and he came into his own again.

**Related Characters:** Buck

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 14

### Explanation and Analysis

In this important passage, London describes how Buck's inner instincts are awoken during his time as a sled dog. For much of his life, he's been living in luxury. Now that he's forced to work hard for his dinner, however, Buck can no longer rely on dependable masters. Instead, Buck has to rely on his instincts--instincts that are buried deep in his DNA, thanks to thousands of years of wolfish ancestry. Buck has an innate instinct to fight, to thief, and above all, to survive. Thus London portrays him as not so much progressing, but "devolving"--returning to his original, natural state.

Buck is a survivor, first and foremost. He was initially disoriented and frightened by his new environment, but instead of giving up, he used his instincts to regain his confidence. Now, Buck seems surprisingly at ease among the other sled-dogs--he's given into his survival instincts.

## Chapter 3 Quotes

●● The dominant primordial beast was strong in Buck, and under the fierce conditions of the trail it grew and grew.

**Related Characters:** Buck

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 15

### Explanation and Analysis

London is fond of beginning each one of his chapters with a quick "recap" of the chapter before--London was a serial novelist for much of his life, and needed to remind his readers what had happened in the story the previous week. Here, London shows us that the "primordial beast"--i.e., the aggregate of thousands of years of wolfish behavior--has taken over in Buck's consciousness. Buck has had experiences at a luxurious house, but these experiences don't shape his behavior remotely as much as his instincts. In effect, London is saying that a dog's behavior--and perhaps, a human's, too--is more instinct than education. Buck has to learn to adapt to his environment, but at the end of the day, he obeys one law and one law alone--the law of the club and fang. Survival is his highest priority, and everything else is a detail.

☛ It was inevitable that the clash for leadership should come. Buck wanted it. He wanted it because it was his nature, because he had been gripped tight by that nameless, incomprehensible pride of the trail and trace--that pride which holds dogs in the toil to the last gasp, which lure them to die joyfully in the harness, and breaks their hearts if they cut out of the harness.

**Related Characters:** Buck

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 19

### Explanation and Analysis

In this section, we see that Buck is developing a rivalry with another dog, Spitz. Like Buck, Spitz is strong and dangerous, and feels a natural instinct to be top dog in the "traces" (harness of the sled). There can only be one leader among the animals, though--thus, a clash between Buck and Spitz is inevitable.

What's the difference between Buck and Spitz? Nothing, perhaps--they're both just dogs trying to survive and master their environment. One gets the sense that London could have told his story from the perspective of any one of

the dogs pulling the sled. Buck's story is particularly interesting, though, in that Buck spends the majority of his life in luxury--thus, by telling the story from Buck's point of view, London shows how strong a dog's instincts are, to the point where they overshadow its literal experiences. In the end, though, Buck and Spitz are just two dogs trying to gain power--because it's their nature.

☛ The insidious revolt led by Buck had destroyed the solidarity of the team. It no longer was as one dog leaping in the traces.

**Related Characters:** Buck

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 21

### Explanation and Analysis

In this fascinating section, Buck begins a subtle "revolt" against Spitz, the top dog of the sled team. Buck notices that Spitz has attacked a weaker dog named Pike. Buck cleverly defends Pike from Spitz's aggression, building loyalty between Pike (and, by extension, the other weak dogs who are afraid of Spitz) and Buck.

Buck, in short, is a good politician--he knows how to rise to power. Instead of attacking Spitz directly, he builds up a coalition against Spitz, undermining Spitz's power-base. Buck, to use some Marxist language, is the bourgeois politician, building up solidarity with the proletariat in order to defeat the social elite. While it may seem odd that a dog is playing the part of a politician, London doesn't think so at all--the path to power is almost as instinctive as survival itself.

☛ There is an ecstasy that marks the summit of life, and beyond which life cannot rise--and it came to Buck, leading the pack, sounding the old wolf-cry, straining after the food that was alive and that fled swiftly before him through the moonlight. He was sounding the depths of his nature, and of the parts of his nature that were deeper than he, going back into the womb of Time. He was mastered by the sheer surging of life, the tidal wave of being

**Related Characters:** Buck

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 22-23

### Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Buck has just defeated Spitz, his rival for power. Buck is a less talented and experienced fighter than Spitz, but he's successfully built loyalty between himself and the other dogs, allowing him to defeat Spitz at the last minute. Buck savors the feeling of dominance he gets from being the new pack leader.

The feeling of power Buck gets in this passage is every bit as basic as the laws of survival itself: over thousands of years, wolves have learned to vie for power over other wolves, because power is surely the best way to ensure plentiful food and shelter. Buck, one could say, is an especially powerful and power-hungry dog—he's extraordinary in the ambition he projects. As a result, he makes a good hero.

☞ Buck stood and looked on, the successful champion, the dominant primordial beast who had made his kill and found it good.

**Related Characters:** Buck

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 24

### Explanation and Analysis

Buck has just defeated Spitz, his rival for power among the sled dogs. In this passage, London reinforces Buck's victory by describing the sense of power and control that Buck feels immediately afterwards.

In a way, the passage conveys two victories simultaneously. The first victory is obvious: Buck's victory over Spitz. The second victory is subtler yet more important: the victory of Buck's savage instincts over his own domestication. Though Buck has been living a life of luxury for many years now, his strong, aggressive instincts come out quickly and exhilaratingly. Here, Buck is finally committed to his new life—a life of constant danger and fighting. Such a life might seem horrible, but Buck savors the constant, aggressive competition.

## Chapter 4 Quotes

☞ At a bound Buck took up the duties of leadership, and where judgment was required, and quick thinking and quick acting he showed himself superior even of Spitz, of whom François had never seen an equal.

**Related Characters:** Buck, Spitz, François

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 26

### Explanation and Analysis

Buck is now the pack leader—the lord of the other dogs. Buck has defeated his rival, Spitz, by proving himself to be a stronger and savvier animal. Buck's victory over Spitz is surprising to François, the human master of the dogs, because François had never seen a dog stronger than Spitz.

The passage is important because it clarifies why, exactly, Buck defeated Spitz. At times, Buck seemed like a sleazy politician, manipulating the other dogs against Spitz in order to defeat him. But here, it becomes clear that the better dog has won: Buck defeated Spitz not because he was sneaky but because he was stronger and faster. In the end, Darwin is right: the fitter animal always survives.

☞ Far more potent were the memories of his heredity that gave things he had never seen before a seeming familiarity; the instincts (which were but the memories of his ancestors become habits) which had lapsed in later days, and still later, in hum, quickened and become alive again.

**Related Characters:** Buck

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 28

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Buck moves still further into the realm of instinct and heredity. Buck has had plenty of memories, but as he proceeds with being a sled dog, he begins to think more about his ancestral memories—i.e., the experiences of the millions of wolves from whom he's descended.

The passage offers an interesting definition of instinct: memories that have evolved into habits. Over the course of thousands or even millions of years, wolves have accumulated certain experiences that they pass down to their offspring: instincts for survival, fighting, and

endurance. Buck, we know by now, is a particularly distinguished inheritor of such instincts: he feels the influence of his wolf ancestors particularly strongly.

☛ Dave resented being taken out, grunting and growling while the traces were unfastened, and whimpering brokenheartedly when he saw Sol-leks in the position he had held and served so long. For the pride of trace and trail was his, and sick, unto death, he could not bear that another dog should do his work.

**Related Characters:** Buck, Dave, Sol-leks

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 30

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dave, one of the sled dogs who originally trained Buck in how to obey orders, collapses from exhaustion—he's gotten so old that he can no longer be a successful sled dog. And yet Dave still wants to be a sled dog—he wants to keep his spot in the traces, to continue working for his human masters, right up to the moment when they end his life with a gunshot.

The passage is equal parts noble and disturbing: Dave is the very embodiment of the wolfish instinct to fight and survive. And yet in the end, even Dave's instincts for survival end the same way: death. There's a tragic futility to everything the dogs do—no matter how much power they attain within the ranks of the sled, they're still the slaves of their human masters, forced to break their bodies pulling heavy loads thousands of miles.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

☛ In excess of their own misery, [Hal, Charles, and Mercedes] were callous to the suffering of their animals. Hal's theory, which he practiced on others, was that one must get hardened. He had started out preaching it to his sister and brother-in-law. Failing there, he hammered it into the dogs with a club.

**Related Characters:** Hal, Mercedes, Charles

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 38

### Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Buck has been passed to another set of owners, Hal, Charles, and Mercedes. These owners are foolish and incompetent—instead of treating their animals well, they burden them with horribly heavy loads that exhaust the dogs and break their bodies rapidly.

The new owners have a philosophy for how to control their animals: they believe that it's best to be cruel and harsh to the dogs, in order to separate the strong from the weak and make them all get "hardened." Such a theory is a bastardization of Darwin's survival of the fittest—much like Social Darwinism, the doctrine that was used to justify wealth inequality in human society. Hal and his co-owners don't understand anything about taking care of dogs—but they disguise their own incompetence by claiming that they're "teaching" their dogs a lesson. In political terms, Hal is an unjust ruler; even if London doesn't see anything wrong with humans owning dogs, he insists that there's a right and a wrong way to do so.

☛ [Buck] had made up his mind not to get up. He had a vague feeling of impending doom. What of the thin and rotten ice he had felt under his feet all day, it seemed that he sensed disaster close at hand, out there ahead on the ice where his master was trying to drive.

**Related Characters:** Buck

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 40

### Explanation and Analysis

In this scene from the end of the chapter, Buck refuses to cooperate with his tyrannical owners. The owners want Buck and the other dogs to carry a heavy load over thin ice—in other words, they want the dogs to defy the laws of nature, in a suicidal attempt to transport their own heavy cargo. Buck, knowing full-well that he won't survive the trek across the frozen lake (because of an instinctual "sense"), refuses to get up, and the other dogs follow his example.

Chapter 5 is important because it shows that London doesn't just believe that the world is a brutal, violent place. Even if it's dogs' fate to pull sleds for humans, there's a big difference between a just and an unjust master. Buck's current owners' tyranny, unlike that of their predecessors, is

simply discordant with nature—it violates the natural order. As a result, Buck, listening to his natural instincts, refuses to play along. London's novel doesn't have any morality beyond the natural order of the universe—and yet here, he judges Hal and the other owners for violating such a natural order.

“They're lazy, I tell you, and you've got to whip them to get anything out of them. That's their way. You ask any one. Ask one of those men.”

**Related Characters:** Hal (speaker), The Insides, Buck

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 33

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hal complains that his dogs are lazy for refusing to cross the frozen lake bearing their masters' cargo. In order to make an example out of the dogs, Hal chooses to whip Buck.

Hal's speech shows how out of touch he is with his own dogs, not to mention the realities of the world. Buck knows far better than Hal what's going on: he's not refusing to pull the cargo because he's lazy, but because he knows that the cargo will break through the frozen river and kill him. Even here, Buck is a fundamentally self-interested animal; he won't do anything that he senses will endanger himself. Hal, by contrast, looks like a fool—he claims that you can “ask anyone” how lazy the dogs are, when London's book testifies to the fact that Buck isn't the least bit lazy, and it's also presumed that the wiser dog owners around Hal would similarly disagree with Hal's methods.

“If you strike that dog again, I'll kill you,” he at last managed to say in a choking voice.

**Related Characters:** John Thornton (speaker), Hal, Buck

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 41

### Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Hal is beating Buck for refusing to cross the frozen river. As Hal beats Buck, a worker, John Thornton, intervenes and threatens to kill Hal if he hurts Buck again. The emotion of the scene is palpable: John seems to be

choking as he speaks, suggesting that he's crying because of Hal's cruelty.

How should we understand this scene—which, unlike everything else in the book, seems to put forth a morality based on compassion and sympathy? Perhaps the reason that London shows John behaving compassionately is that he wants to contrast John's behavior with that of the violent, irrational Hal. Hal is a man who simply doesn't understand how nature works—he's about to send a heavy cargo across a thin layer of ice. John is compassionate, but he's also smart enough to see that Buck isn't really being lazy at all—Buck just wants to survive. London suggests that even John's compassion is based on the principle of survival of the fittest—John protects Buck because he recognizes that Buck is smart enough to avoid the ice, and because he respects Buck's strength and intelligence.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

Love, genuine passionate love, was his for the first time. This he had never experienced at Judge Miller's. With the Judge's sons, hunting and tramping, it had been a working partnership; with the Judge's grandsons, a pompous guardianship. With the Judge himself, a stately dignified friendship. But love that was feverish and burning, that was adoration, that was madness, it had taken John Thornton to arouse.

**Related Characters:** Buck, Judge Miller, John Thornton

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 42

### Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Six, the novel changes directions abruptly. Buck has had many masters before, but only now does he have an ideal master—someone who genuinely loves him. London distinguishes sharply between the love Buck received in his old, luxurious lifestyle—such love, we're told, wasn't really based in respect or mutual appreciation. Here, however, Buck and his new owner, John, genuinely respect each other: they recognize that they're both talented, intelligent beings, capable of surviving, and beyond that they truly enjoy each other's company.

In this passage, London outlines a kind of “ideal society.” London, a politically active thinker throughout his life, doesn't believe that a society can ever be totally just unless the rulers and the people truly love each other: if they truly

recognize each other's abilities and work together. Buck thinks that he's found an ideal society with John, as they work together to survive.

☞ “As you love me, Buck. As you love me.”

**Related Characters:** John Thornton (speaker), Buck

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 50

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Buck prepares for a wager that will make his master, John, rich. Buck has been sent to move a thousand-pound sled—if he succeeds, John will win a lot of money. As John prepares Buck for the wager, he tells Buck to succeed if Buck loves him.

The passage is interesting because it shows the strengths and weaknesses of John and Buck's relationship. Buck sincerely loves and even worships John, protecting him from danger and making him lots of money. The relationship is strong because John and Buck seem to genuinely respect each other—like the citizens of an ideal society, they recognize their partners' strengths. And yet the relationship between John and Buck is totally unequal—as the quote suggests, Buck probably “loves” John more than John loves Buck. John is still very much the boss, even when Buck does all the real work.

☞ He had killed man, the noblest game of all, and he had killed in the face of the law of club and fang.

**Related Characters:** Buck, The Yeehats

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 60

### Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Buck finally steps out of line and breaks the natural order, the “law of club and fang.” He suspects that a group of Yeehats has killed his previous master, John. Buck, who loved John intensely, is overcome with hatred, and he

attacks the Yeehats, killing some of them. Buck has never before killed a human being—he's always been trained to obey humans at all costs, and to accept their mastery. Paradoxically, it was Buck's love for another human being that led him to kill these humans.

Buck seems to be overcoming his natural subservience to humanity. He's appreciated some of his previous masters, but at the end of the day, they needed him more than he needed them. Buck has been trained to obey because of the threat of violence, and because of the sense of a natural hierarchy. But now, Buck is free to be his own master—to live among other wolves instead of being exploited by humans.

☞ It was the call, the many-noted call, sounding more luringly and compellingly than ever before. And as never before he was ready to obey. John Thornton was dead. The last tie was broken. Man and the claims of man no longer bound him.

**Related Characters:** Buck, John Thornton

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 61

### Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the novel, London is at his most romantic and his most political. Over the course of the novel, Buck has had many different masters: metaphorical tyrants, oligarchs, democrats, etc.—some Buck has hated, others he's loved. And yet every leader Buck ever had stole his own labor from him: Buck's leaders imprisoned him, forcing him to work for little to no reward.

Now that Buck has no human master, he's free to live in a utopian society of wolves. After years of having his labors stolen from him, he finally controls what he does and where he goes. In the past, Buck hungered for a human master, but now, he can get by without one. Notice that had Buck been sent into the wild immediately after leaving the Judge's house, he would never have been happy there—he would have wanted to return home right away, and probably would have died. But because of the gradual evolution (or devolution) of Buck's situation over the course of the novel, Buck is finally prepared to be his own master.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CHAPTER 1: INTO THE PRIMITIVE

*The Call of the Wild* begins with an epigraph of a John M. O'Hara poem that speaks of ancient, "ferine," and "nomadic" yearnings, or "old [wild and wandering] longings" leaping forward, chafing against "customs chains," and finally awakening into life from a "brumal sleep," or wintery hibernation.

The narrator introduces Buck, the proud and prized pet of Judge Miller. Buck does "not read the newspapers," so has no sense of the "trouble" that might be "brewing" around him as he cavorts around the Judge's sprawling and "sun-kissed" estate in Santa Clara, or the **Southland**. The "trouble" "brewing" unbeknownst to Buck is the 1879 Klondike gold rush, which has created a great demand for and high price on strong dogs, like Buck.

No other dogs equal Buck's stature as the reigning king of Judge Miller's estate. Since his birth, Buck has ruled over this land, living a comfortable and carefree life that consists of sitting by the Judge's fireside and accompanying his grandchildren on playful hunting trips, or "wild adventures" to the edges of the estate.

Buck's world changes when Manuel, a gardener at the estate with a liking for "Chinese lottery," kidnaps Buck to pay off his gambling debts and support his wife and several children. Buck, unaware of Manuel's plan, naively accompanies him to the flag station, where an unnamed dog trader ties a rope tightly around Buck's neck. Driven by pain, anger, and humiliation, Buck attacks the man, but struggles against the rope's grip. Buck, subdued, is thrown into a crate, unconscious.

Buck gains consciousness and realizes, from previous trips he has taken with the Judge, that he is on a train. The dog trader approaches Buck, but he bites the man's hand, lacerating it. The man chokes Buck, throwing him back into a cage-like crate. Buck seethes and starves in his crate for two days and nights as the dog trader and other vagabonds taunt and harass him. He vows never to be tied down against his will again.

*The poem describes nature's call as a kind of awakening. The ancient longings to roam wild and free are dormant, or sleeping, but when called, they spring to life violently. This awakening foreshadows Buck's own transformation from domesticated dog to wild wolf.*



*Buck's ignorance of world events highlights the insular quality of his life. In Santa Clara, Buck is protected and sheltered from the threats of the outside world, highlighting his domesticated status. Under the Judge's care, he enjoys the luxury of being unaware of the external factors that might harm his existence.*



*Through Buck's aristocratic view of the world London portrays Buck as a princely pet, whose protection of the Judge's family is merely ceremonial. Buck has no real occupation, but is content to live life comfortably as an ornamental figurehead.*



*That Manuel is able to trick Buck spotlights Buck's blind trust in man. Once roped, Buck senses that his freedom is threatened and reacts fiercely. However, man's authority overpowers his own sense of mastery as Buck is quickly subdued by the rope and crate. Buck's captivity indicates that his destiny is no longer his own, but in the hands of the men who bind him.*



*Now caged, Buck realizes that his freedom has been compromised. His wild instincts awaken in the face of his captivity, so Buck reacts to this affront by lashing out savagely against his captors. That Buck vows never to be roped again underlines his innate unwillingness to bend under the mastery of others (though he has much to learn in the gaining of such mastery over himself).*



In Seattle, four men unload Buck's crate. A man in a red sweater breaks it open with a hatchet. Buck launches out of the crate, leaping towards the man. He's stunned when the man strikes him with a **club**. Buck lunges again and again, but is struck down each time. Buck has never been beaten before. Dazed with pain from the club's blows, Buck is introduced to **primitive law** by learning to obey **the law of club** and the men who wield it. The "lesson" is driven home when he witnesses the death of a dog, who refuses to submit to the man in the red sweater's **club**.

Buck watches as other dogs are bought and sold by the man in the red sweater. Buck along with a female dog, Curly, are bought by two French-Canadians, François and Perrault. Departing from Seattle, they take Buck and Curly to the **Northland** on a ship called the *Narwhal*. On board, François and Perrault acquire two more dogs, Spitz and Dave. At sea, Spitz steals some of Buck's food, but François whips Spitz before Buck can retaliate, thereby rising in Buck's esteem. Finally the small band of men and dogs arrives at their final destination, Dyea Beach in Alaska, where Buck steps onto something cold he's never encountered before: snow.

## CHAPTER 2: THE LAW OF CLUB AND FANG

Far from the "lazy, sun-kissed life" of the civilized Southland, Buck's first day on the snowy shores of Dyea Beach is a "nightmare." He quickly senses that this place is not for leisurely loafing, but a perilous frontier where there is "neither peace, nor rest, nor safety." "Life and limb" are constantly in danger, requiring one to be vigilantly alert because these are not "town dogs and men," but "savages" who abide by the **law of the club and fang**.

Buck observes the cruel ways of the **Northland** and its "wolfish creatures" immediately through an "unforgettable lesson." Curly approaches a husky in a friendly manner, but the dog strikes at her, ripping her face wide open. The other dogs circle as Curly attempts to defend herself. Yet the husky rushes against her, knocking her off her feet. Because Curly is unable to regain her footing, the surrounding canines join in the carnage, trampling her to death. Buck observes Spitz emerging from the fray with his tongue sticking out; he appears to be laughing. François, with an ax, and three other men, club the remaining dogs off of Curly's lifeless and shredded body. The image disturbs Buck, who recognizes that in the Northland there is "no fair play."

*From his beating at the hands of the man in the red sweater Buck is introduced to primitive law, or the laws of survival. The club is the mechanism by which Buck recognizes that man is a "master to be obeyed." He learns to submit to the power of the club—to overwhelming strength—out of pain and to obey the man who wields this weapon because with it he carries a lethal authority. The law of club firmly establishes man's authority over dog, even though Buck resists this tenet.*



*As Buck changes hands and moves northward, he ceases to be a pet and is now more of a commodity. He is bought and sold like every other dog he sees passing through the man in the red sweater's hands. Spitz's attempt to steal Buck's food establishes their rivalry. Spitz' success in taking the food (before François intervenes) demonstrates Spitz's mastery over Buck. Meanwhile, François's punishment of Spitz underlines man's authority as a master of canines, but also shows that François is a fair master, who exercises his power justly. Buck's first encounter with snow signals that his life is about to change greatly in the cold Northland.*



*Buck's initial observation of the contrast between the Northland and the Southland underlines the radical shift in his surroundings. The Northland is not just coated in snow, it is governed by different rules. Whereas the Southland is marked by sunshine and leisure, the North is a perilous place where every dog and man must look out for himself.*



*Curly's shocking and sudden death underlines the savagery of the law of club and fang. Her death shows that in the Northland there is "no fair play." Even though François and his men attempt to keep order among the dogs with their clubs, from Curly's death, it is clear that those who cannot defend themselves become easy prey. Buck learns quickly that survival requires one to never let down his/her guard. To do otherwise means certain death. That Spitz seems to be laughing at Curly's death only increases the sense of Spitz's power but also Buck's sense of rivalry with Spitz.*



Buck receives "another shock" when François harnesses him to **the traces**. Having observed horses harnessed in a similar manner to haul loads, Buck's pride is hurt because he's reduced to the level of a working animal. But he embraces his work obediently and quickly learns from Dave and Spitz how to work in traces. Upon returning to camp, he knows to stop at "ho," go at "mush," makes wide turns, and to keep clear when going downhill.

On the trail, Perrault acquires two more dogs, brothers Billee and Joe. Billee is good-natured, while Joe is sullen and mean-spirited, confronting Spitz with growls. Buck welcomes the new recruits, while Spitz thrashes Billee in retribution for Joe's belligerence. By evening, Perrault acquires a one-eyed, old husky, called Sol-leks, or the "Angry One." Like Dave, he likes to be left alone and does not like being approached from his blind side, as Buck learns when he gets slashed on the shoulder when he approaches Sol-leks from this angle. Buck learns that each dog possesses a "vital ambition."

Night descends upon the trail. Buck, troubled by cold and sleeplessness, attempts to enter François' and Perrault's candle-lit tent, but they drive him away. Buck wanders the camp in search of shelter, but finds no warmth or protection, until he stumbles upon a loose patch of snow, under which Billee is sleeping. Billee gives a friendly yelp, inviting Buck to burrow in the snow with him. Buck finds himself a spot, buries himself in the snow, and sleeps soundly.

Buck, awakened by the camp's morning stirrings breaks out of his snowy mound. The team breaks camp for Dyea Ca-on—Spitz in the lead, followed by Sol-leks, Buck, and Dave in the rear. Situated between Dave and Sol-leks, Buck receives "instruction" in dog sledding. They correct his errors with little nips, while François administers his whip when needed. A quick learner, Buck "masters his work" after toiling in the traces for only a few days, learning to always keep the traces clear, or else face a "sound trouncing."

On the trail, Buck develops a "ravenous" hunger, but learns to eat his food quickly so that the other dogs will not steal his ration. He learns to steal food, as well, after watching Pike, a sly dog, steal a slice of bacon from Perrault. Buck repeats the theft, but this time stealing the whole chunk of pork. He is never caught, nor suspected of the crime. Buck observes that his ability to steal without "moral consideration" marks his adjustment to the competitive lifestyle of the Northland and his "retrogression" into a primitive animal. He recognizes that he does not steal "for the joy of it," but because he is driven by hunger.

*Because Buck is a proud creature, he is shocked and demeaned when harnessed like a mere work animal. Buck's harnessing signals a shift in his relationship with man. No longer a prized pet, but a working dog, Buck must learn how to survive in the traces by obeying his masters' commands and following the lead of his teammates.*



*From these exchanges, Buck learns to abide by the social hierarchy of the sled dog team. Newer members like Billee, Joe, and Buck should defer to more experienced dogs, like Spitz and Sol-leks not only because the other dogs are more senior, but because they are more dangerous. To cross them is to risk one's very survival. This hierarchy represents every dog's "vital ambition" to master his survival, to become the lead dog.*



*By driving Buck out of their tent, François and Perrault firmly establish that his place is outside, along with the rest of the working dogs. He is no pet. Thrust out of man's care, Buck must learn to fend for himself by keeping warm during the frigid night. From Billee, he masters an important survival skill: burrowing in the snow to keep warm.*



*The order in which the dogs are placed within the traces reinforces the pecking order of this team. A domineering animal, Spitz is harnessed in the front as lead dog, while Dave, a more submissive creature, brings up the rear. Buck is placed between Dave and Sol-leks because they are more experienced. They teach Buck how to run in the traces. Buck quickly "masters" this skill, confirming his keen ability to adapt.*



*Buck's ability to steal food demonstrates his ability to master survival skills quickly. It also signals the start of his steady devolution from a domesticated pet into a wild beast. By pilfering food, Buck shows that stealing transcends any kind of "moral consideration." Stealing for Buck is not a matter of right, or wrong, but a means of survival to ward off hunger. Because food is a necessity, stealing it is a justified action.*



As Buck gains experience on the trail, he transforms physically. His senses sharpen. His body strengthens against pain. He learns to care for himself by biting out the ice between his toes and eating anything. His domesticated habits fall away, while his latent instincts awaken. He remembers the days of wild wolf packs frolicking through the woods and begins to fight and howl like a wolf, bringing the wolves' "ancient song" to life.

*Buck becomes more wolfish through his experiences on the trail and the awakening of his feral instincts. This manifests through Buck's physical, mental, and behavioral transformation into a more wolf-like creature. He not only begins to look and think like a wolf, but he acts like one, too. Through these changes the "ancient song," or call of the wild comes to life within Buck.*



### CHAPTER 3: THE DOMINANT PRIMORDIAL BEAST

The "dominant primordial beast" grows stronger in Buck as conditions on the trail become rougher, and his rivalry with Spitz more perilous. Buck is careful not to pick any rash fights, but Spitz never misses an opportunity to show his teeth. One night, while the team makes camp off Lake Le Barge, Buck nestles beneath a rock. Buck leaves his spot to eat his ration, but returns to find a growling Spitz occupying his "nest." They prepare to fight, but their tussle is interrupted when hundreds of "starving huskies" attack the camp.

*The "dominant primordial beast" represents Buck's innate drive to master others. The dog that stands in the way of Buck's rise to power is Spitz. And Spitz is not going down easily, as his threatening move of occupying Buck's nest demonstrates. In order for Buck to embrace his inner alpha dog, he will have to oust Spitz from his position as lead dog. The struggle for mastery of the pack begins.*



The camp is in a frenzy. Perrault clubs the skeletal huskies, while the sled dogs fight against the mad canines. Three huskies attack Buck. Slashed and ripped, Buck retaliates, biting into a husky's jugular. The taste of the warm, frothy blood rouses his fighting instincts, but before he can make another move, Spitz attacks him from the side. Spitz attempts to throw Buck off his feet, but Buck steadies himself, retreating with the other dogs.

*The huskies' attack magnifies the wild beast stirring within Buck. Just as the huskies are mad with the primal urges of hunger, Buck is incited to fight when he first tastes blood. His instinct to kill, or be killed awakens as Buck fights off the husky, while his will to survive surges when Spitz takes the opportunity to attack Buck. Spitz' attack here indicates that he recognizes the threat Buck poses to his status as alpha dog.*



When the team reemerges from the woods the next morning, the battle is over, but the huskies have laid waste to the camp, having eaten practically everything in sight and injured almost every single sled dog. With supplies depleted and the dogs riddled with bites, François worries that his dogs have been infected with madness, (rabies), and is uncertain that they will survive the next four hundred miles to Dawson.

*François's concern for his dogs' health reveals the co-dependent nature of the relationship between man and dog. François knows that his survival inevitably depends on the well being of his animals, for without them he cannot make the trek across the Klondike.*



Perrault dauntlessly leads the team across Thirty Mile River's thin ice. Buck almost falls through the ice twice, but is rescued both times before he freezes or drowns. One morning at Pelly, Dolly suddenly goes mad and begins chasing Buck. François kills Dolly with an ax, but Buck is exhausted from the chase. Spitz, seeing an "opportunity," springs upon Buck, but François whips him before battle can ensue.

*The thin ice alludes to the wild's treacherous quality, while Dolly's madness underlines its unpredictability. These foreboding qualities enforce nature's role in natural selection—some will survive nature's curve balls, other's will not, and survival depends on a combination of skill and luck. Spitz's opportunistic attack on Buck shows that their rivalry is escalating, and that wily Spitz will do whatever he can to stop Buck's ascent.*



Buck's growing pride in his work and confidence in his inborn ability to lead drives him to subvert Spitz's dominance. Buck incites a subtle insurrection when he defends Pike against Spitz's authority. François's whip keeps order, but a showdown between Buck and Spitz is imminent as the team arrives in Dawson.

After a week's rest in Dawson, the team pushes onward to Skaguay. But there is unrest in **the traces** as Buck's insurrection continues. One night, Buck leads the pack in a rabbit hunt. Caught up in the chase, Buck fails to notice Spitz leaving the pack and is surprised when Spitz leaps out to snatch the rabbit. Buck barrels into him, knocking them both into the snow.

The time has come for Spitz and Buck to face off. A silence falls upon the pack as they circle around the rivals. Buck attacks Spitz with fervor from every angle, but Spitz, an experienced fighter, fends off every assault, leaving Buck bloodied and himself untouched. Buck rushes at Spitz again, but this time clamps down on Spitz's leg, breaking it. The ravenous pack descends upon the crippled Spitz, while Buck looks on the carnage with satisfaction.

## CHAPTER 4: WHO HAS WON TO MASTERSHIP

The morning after the fight, François notices that Spitz is missing and that Buck is covered with wounds. He surmises that Buck has killed Spitz, but proceeds with harnessing the dogs. Buck walks to take Spitz's position at the head of **the traces**. Yet François harnesses Sol-leks there. Buck, indignant, lunges at Sol-leks, who stands back. François grabs Buck by the scruff of his neck, removing him from the traces, then threatens him with the **club** when Buck attempts to assume Spitz's position again. Buck eludes the club's reach, until François and Perrault relent by fastening Buck in the lead position.

On the trail, Buck proves to be an excellent lead dog. He conducts the difficulties of the trail with quick judgment, keeps his teammates in line, and sets high work expectations. The team makes record time from Thirty Mile River to Skaguay, covering an average of forty miles a day over fourteen days.

*By siding with weaker dogs, Buck instigates a sly and cunning mutiny to usurp the power he feels born to inherit. François's whip maintains a thin semblance of order before the impending war.*



*The disorder in the traces magnifies the unsettling effect of Buck's pursuit to overthrow Spitz. Meanwhile, Spitz's cunning attack on Buck signals that he will not go down without a fight. Just as only one dog can kill the rabbit, only one dog can be left standing as master of the pack.*



*This final showdown will determine the leadership of the pack. When Buck breaks Spitz's leg, he displays his wolfish prowess and wins the canine struggle for mastery. By overthrowing Spitz, Buck not only commits his rival to certain death, he establishes his supremacy and the dominance of his "primordial beast." And note how once the other dogs sense Spitz' weakness they attack and kill him. There is no sentimentality for their former leader.*



*Buck's unwillingness to be harnessed in any position but that of lead dog underlines his conviction that he is the rightful leader of the team. By standing firm in the traces, he affirms his dominance over the other dogs. Yet Buck's leadership is only confirmed when his human masters confer that honor upon him by harnessing him in the lead position. While Buck dominates the pack, his authority is predicated upon his human owners' approval.*



*Through the team's record run, Buck demonstrates his mastery of his work. He has learned how to work, how to survive in the Klondike, and how to lead a pack. He is not only fit to lead the team, but he is more than fit to survive and thrive in the wild.*



In Skaguay, François and Perrault become minor celebrities for the record timing of their run. They celebrate for a week's time, but official orders from the government force them to depart the town, thereby leaving Buck and his team behind. François weeps over Buck as he and Perrault exit Buck's life "for good."

*François and Perrault's departure from Buck's life signals the end of one phase in Buck's relationship with man. They have been wise and just masters to Buck. That François weeps over Buck shows the level of deep respect and care he has towards him.*



Another courier, called the Scotch half-breed, (also referred to as the Scotsman), takes charge of Buck's sled dog team, adding a dozen more dogs to the pack. Under a heavy load of mail, the dogs toil their way slowly towards Dawson to make the delivery. The labor is monotonous and wearing, but in the evenings, Buck begins to have visions of a "hairy," "short-legged" **caveman**, clad in animal skins, squatting by the fire.

*Buck is sold again, bringing a new master into his life. Buck's team suffers under the Scotsman's care because his course is driven by society's insatiable demands for material goods. Buck's dream of a primitive man shows that his memory is receding into a primeval past, but also that he is looking for something more in a human master, an equality and cooperation that is impossible when he works for humans.*



Buck awakens from his dream-like state to face the harsh realities of life on the trail. Dave comes down with a mysterious illness, becoming so weak that he can barely stand in **the traces**. The Scotsman removes Dave from the traces, putting Sol-leks in his place. Dave resents being displaced; he refuses to walk alongside the sled by firmly standing in his place at the rear. In a merciful gesture, the Scotsman harnesses Dave in the traces. They drive on, but the next morning Dave, collapsed, cannot even walk over to the sled that's pulling away. The Scotsman halts the sleigh, retraces his steps, and the dogs hear a gunshot ring out.

*Dave's unswerving determination to remain in the traces demonstrates his pride in and loyalty to his work. Dave's death also shows the interplay between man and the laws of nature. Although the Scotsman drives his animals to near exhaustion, he exercises some judiciousness in taking the laws of nature into his own hands. He shoots Dave out of mercy, to save him from a long and painful natural death on the trail, but he also respects the dog's dying wish to serve in the traces for as long as he can.*



## CHAPTER 5: THE TOIL OF TRACE AND TRAIL

The sled dog team arrives at Skaguay thirty days later. The dogs are weary, so when the Scotsman is called to make another delivery, he replaces them with new dogs, selling Buck and his team to Hal and Charles, a family of amateur settlers, who are "out of place" in the Northland.

*Buck changes hands again, signaling a shift in his relationship with man. London's note that Hal and Charles are "out of place" suggests that they are not fit to survive in the Klondike because of their inexperience and other attributes.*



The dogs are taken to camp, where Hal's sister and Charles' wife, Mercedes loads up the sled with pots, pans, clothes, and tents. The sled is so heavy that the dogs cannot pull it. Though town's folk warn against carrying such weight, Hal proceeds, attempting to spur the dogs forward with his whip. Mercedes pleads with the dogs to run. One onlooker recommends that they break their sled's runners out of the ice. This works, but when the sled slides down a steep slope half the load tumbles off into the snow. Buck leads his team onward, running away from the scene.

*Hal, Charles, and Mercedes' are poor masters because they are foolish and inconsiderate. They don't listen to experienced settlers (i.e. they don't learn) and are violent toward their dogs. Unlike François, Hal is not judicious in using his whip; he uses it to resolve any problem, even if it is not the most effective solution. His propensity towards violence suggests that he will be a cruel master.*



Kind-hearted towns folk collect the dogs and fallen articles, but also advise Hal, Charles and Mercedes to lighten their load and acquire more dogs. They cut the load in half and buy six dogs, creating a massive team of fourteen hounds. Yet the load remains heavy, while the new dogs, a miscellaneous group of luxury breeds and "mongrels," called the "Outsides" are quite inexperienced for the trail ahead.

Buck distrusts his new owners, observing that they are undisciplined, disorderly, and unable to "learn." Because Hal miscalculates their rations, they run out of dog food. Underfed, the team's run time slows and stamina dwindles. The Outsides perish quickly, while the remaining dogs starve. Hal, Charles, and Mercedes, constantly squabble, making them "callous" to the suffering of their animals.

Hal's whip and club drive Buck and his team onward, despite their exhaustion. Only five dogs remain, after Hal kills Billee with an ax for falling down in **the traces**. Wounded, weary, and traumatized, the dogs do not even notice that spring has arrived. The ice and snow is starting to melt as they arrive at John Thornton's camp at the mouth of White River.

The dogs drop down in exhaustion at John Thornton's camp. Thornton advises Hal not to cross the river, because the ice is thinning. Hal disregards this warning, instead whipping his dogs to get up and run. Yet Buck, overcome by an "impending" sense of "doom," refuses to rise. Hal takes up his club and beats Buck. Just as life is about to flicker out of him, Thornton tackles Hal, rescuing Buck from the brink of death. Hal threatens Thornton with his knife, but Thornton knocks it out of Hal's hands with his ax. Thornton picks up the knife, using it to cut Buck out of his **traces**. Hal, tired from the fight, retreats with Charles, Mercedes and the remaining dogs, heading towards the riverbank. Thornton and Buck watch the distant sled as it suddenly drops through the ice into a "yawning hole."

## CHAPTER 6: FOR THE LOVE OF MAN

Under Thornton's care, Buck recovers. Experiencing love for the first time, Buck comes to adore and admire Thornton as his "ideal master." Although the **call** beckons Buck into the forest, he remains devoted to Thornton, returning to his fireside, whenever tempted. Buck follows in loyal pursuit of Thornton when he rafts down towards Dawson with his two dogs, Skeet and Nig, and his human companions, Hans and Pete.

*Hal, Charles, and Mercedes' difficulty in assembling their sled demonstrates their unwillingness to adapt. That they buy more dogs and barely lighten their load shows that they would rather impose their material possessions onto the land, than adapt to it. Given that they themselves are ill suited to the Northland, it is unsurprising that they foolishly acquire dogs that are also unsuited and inexperienced.*



*Hal, Charles, and Mercedes' lazy, inconsiderate nature makes them not only poor masters, but poor learners. They quarrel, instead of tending to their animals, showing that they are incapable of sympathy, or learning new skills. Because they don't adapt, their dogs suffer, and so do they.*



*Hal rules like a slave master. He fails to feed his dogs and then whips, clubs, and kills them when they fail. His behavior is unjust and a perversion of the necessary relationship between man and dog, in which man cares for his dogs so the dogs can help him.*



*Hal, Charles, and Mercedes ultimately perish because they flagrantly disrespect nature. They refuse to relinquish their possessions, they ignore the warnings of melting ice, and Hal nearly kills Buck. That they fall through ice underlines their folly, as well as nature's wrath. Buck avoids this fate because he follows his intuition, emphasizing that his feral senses are strong. Buck's survival, juxtaposed against Hal's death, also proves that not all masters are worthy of wielding the club—and that those who aren't worthy will eventually lose their power, as Hal does. Meanwhile, Thornton's brave rescue of Buck shows that he is worthy to take up ownership of Buck.*



*Buck's relationship with Thornton is unique because it is defined by love, making Thornton the "ideal master." Buck does not work for, or guard Thornton, but loves him. Yet this love is so potent that it enslaves Buck, quelling his instinctual desire to go into the forest and compelling him to follow Thornton wherever he may go.*



One day, while resting on a steep cliff, Thornton tests Buck's loyalty by commanding him to jump off its ledge. Buck starts forward, but Thornton grabs him before he can toss himself over the edge. Buck's unwavering obedience delights and disturbs Thornton.

*Buck's devotion to Thornton is so great that it is blind. While Buck lives for Thornton, he will also die for him. This steadfast obedience underlines Thornton's mastery over Buck.*



Buck's devotion continues at Circle City, where Thornton gets into a bar fight with a hot-tempered man, called "Black" Burton. Buck comes to Thornton's defense, launching himself at Burton's throat. The bystanders set up a miner's court to try Buck for the offence, but "discharge" him, citing that he had "sufficient provocation." Buck establishes a reputation throughout Alaska for his loyalty.

*Buck's attack on "Black" Burton shows that though Thornton has tamed Buck's heart, he has not entirely curbed Buck's fighting instincts. The court's ruling in Buck's favor cements the dominance of the law of club and fang in not just the natural world but also the human world of the Northland.*



Buck proves his loyalty again when he saves Thornton's life later that year. During a boat launching, Thornton is flung out of the raft. The river's current sends Thornton into a stretch of wild rapids. Buck jumps in the water, Thornton grabs his tail, and they attempt to swim towards shore, but the current is too strong, so Thornton instructs Buck to leave him behind. Buck returns to shore, but Hans attaches a line of rope to Buck and he launches into the stream again and again, until Thornton's able to grab him and be pulled ashore, "battered," but alive.

*When Buck rescues Thornton, he not only repays John for rescuing his life. He highlights the interdependence of man and dog in the wild. Man and dog rely on each other not only to live, but to survive in the face of nature's unforeseen calamities and conditions. That both Buck and Thornton are willing to risk their lives for the other shows that their relationship is one of mutual love and respect.*



Buck gains even greater fame that winter in Dawson when he performs an incredible "exploit." In the Eldorado Saloon, Thornton boasts that Buck can start a sled with a thousand pounds, break it out of its runners, and "walk off." Matthewson, a rich prospector, wages one thousand dollars that Buck can't pull the sled. With his bluff called, Thornton doubts whether Buck can do it, but takes Matthewson up on his offer, borrowing one thousand dollars from his friend O'Brien to cover the wager.

*Though Thornton may be the "ideal master" in Buck's eyes, he is far from flawless. On a selfish whim, he sets Buck up to take on a daunting task. That he risks Buck's well being to save his pride and grease his wallet, suggests that for a moment he views Buck as a source of pride and profit, casting an unsavory shadow on Thornton's otherwise loving mastership of Buck.*



Onlookers assemble outside, where the men give odds, settling at three to one. Matthewson ups the bet six hundred dollars, and stresses that Buck must break the runners out of the ice in order for the wager to hold. Thornton harnesses him to the sled, carrying forty, twenty-five pound sacks of flour, and whispers to Buck, "As you love me. As you love me."

*Thornton redeems himself when he whispers, "As you love me." Instead of calling Buck to action through fear, or violence, Thornton appeals to Buck's love for him, showing that regardless of the outcome he will still cherish Buck. At the same time, Thornton's whisper is about Buck loving Thornton—the relationship is still about what man gets from dog a bit more than the other way around.*



Thornton shouts directions at Buck to pull the sled. Straining under **the traces**, Buck swings to the right, then to the left, breaking the sled's runners out of the ice. Finally Buck lunges forward, pulling the sled with every fiber of his being, every ounce of his strength. He crosses the one hundred yard line, winning the bet. The crowd erupts in cheers, while Buck and Thornton share a moment of triumph. Buck nips his master, lovingly.

*Pulling the sled is Buck's ultimate showing of loyalty and love for John Thornton. Buck serves in the traces one more time not because he is forced to, but because he loves John Thornton. Yet while love strengthens Buck enough to pull the sled, it still ties him closely to man's ownership.*



## CHAPTER 7: THE SOUNDING OF THE CALL

With the money Thornton wins from the wager he sets out eastward with Buck, Skeet, Nig, Hans, and Pete, going deep into the Klondike in search of a lost mine and miner's cabin. Thornton and his team fail to find the site and end up panning for gold in a shallow river valley, but Buck enjoys wandering and living off the land with his master.

*Thornton's pursuit of this lost place in the wilderness alludes to his yearning to tame the wild for profit. Finding the mine may lead to riches. But the simple way that Thornton lives proves that he is already a master outdoorsman and a successful miner.*



Meanwhile, Buck spends "long hours musing by the fire," dreaming of hunting and gathering with the **caveman**. One night, Buck awakens from this dream to encounter a real life timber wolf, who beckons him into the forest. Buck senses the summoning of **the call** as they cavort in the woods, but Buck remembers John Thornton and eventually returns to his camp.

*Buck's vivid vision of the caveman and encounter with the timber wolf show that Buck's wild yearnings are strengthening. He cannot yet embrace the call because of his devotion to John Thornton, the one human being who maintains a hold on him.*



Buck remains by Thornton's side for two days, but grows restless, returning to the forest in search of the timber wolf. Unable to find him, Buck stalks prey, instead. As he hunts, he feels like a masterful animal, thriving in the wild. After four days of watching a giant, bull moose, he kills the animal, satiating his "blood-longing." Yet he senses that something is amiss back at camp.

*The call is irresistible to Buck as his impatience to return to the forest and thirst for blood demonstrate. Killing the moose of his own accord solidifies Buck's feeling of mastery. He is attuned to the wild—he now knows he can thrive in the wild, can dominate—yet his love for Thornton draws him back to the world of humans at camp.*



On the trail back to camp, Buck finds one of Thornton's dogs dying and Hans face down in the ground, dead. Seeing the native Yeehats dancing over the camp's wreckage, confirms his suspicions that John Thornton is dead. Buck, overcome by rage and grief, defies **the law of club and fang**, attacking the Yeehats, killing some of them, and causing the others to flee.

*Love for Thornton drives Buck to make his most deadly kill. By killing man in direct defiance of the law of club and fang, Buck severs his last thread of domestication. Buck no longer hunts with man, but actively hunts him, overturning man's dominance in his life.*



Buck mourns over John Thornton's body but that night hears **the call**. The wild wolf pack circles him. They lunge and strike at him, but he displays a wolfish agility in fighting back. An old wolf comes forward, sniffs noses with Buck in a friendly manner, and lets out a howl, announcing Buck's initiation into the pack. Buck runs with them, wild and free.

*With John Thornton dead, Buck can relinquish man's hold over him and embrace his wild tendencies. His acceptance into the pack completes his devolution into a wild animal and establishes him as the master of his own fate.*



Buck's story morphs into legend as the Yeehats tell of a mythical Ghost Dog, who terrorizes the valley's natives and hunters. But apart from Indian legend, the narrator tells us that there is a handsome wolf that roams, sometimes alone, sometimes at the head of the pack, singing the "song of the younger world," and who fathers many wolf cubs.

*Buck's legacy affirms his masterful spirit. Not only does he live on as a wild wolf leader, singing an ageless song, he seems to have cheated death itself by being immortalized in legend. Further, by siring wolf pups he creates a biological legacy—he becomes an ancestor for future generations of wild wolves. He has, in a sense, mastered both life and death.*





## HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

### MLA

Campodonico, Christina. "The Call of the Wild." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 10 Nov 2013. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Campodonico, Christina. "The Call of the Wild." LitCharts LLC, November 10, 2013. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-call-of-the-wild>.

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### MLA

London, Jack. *The Call of the Wild*. Dover Publications. 1990.

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London, Jack. *The Call of the Wild*. New York: Dover Publications. 1990.