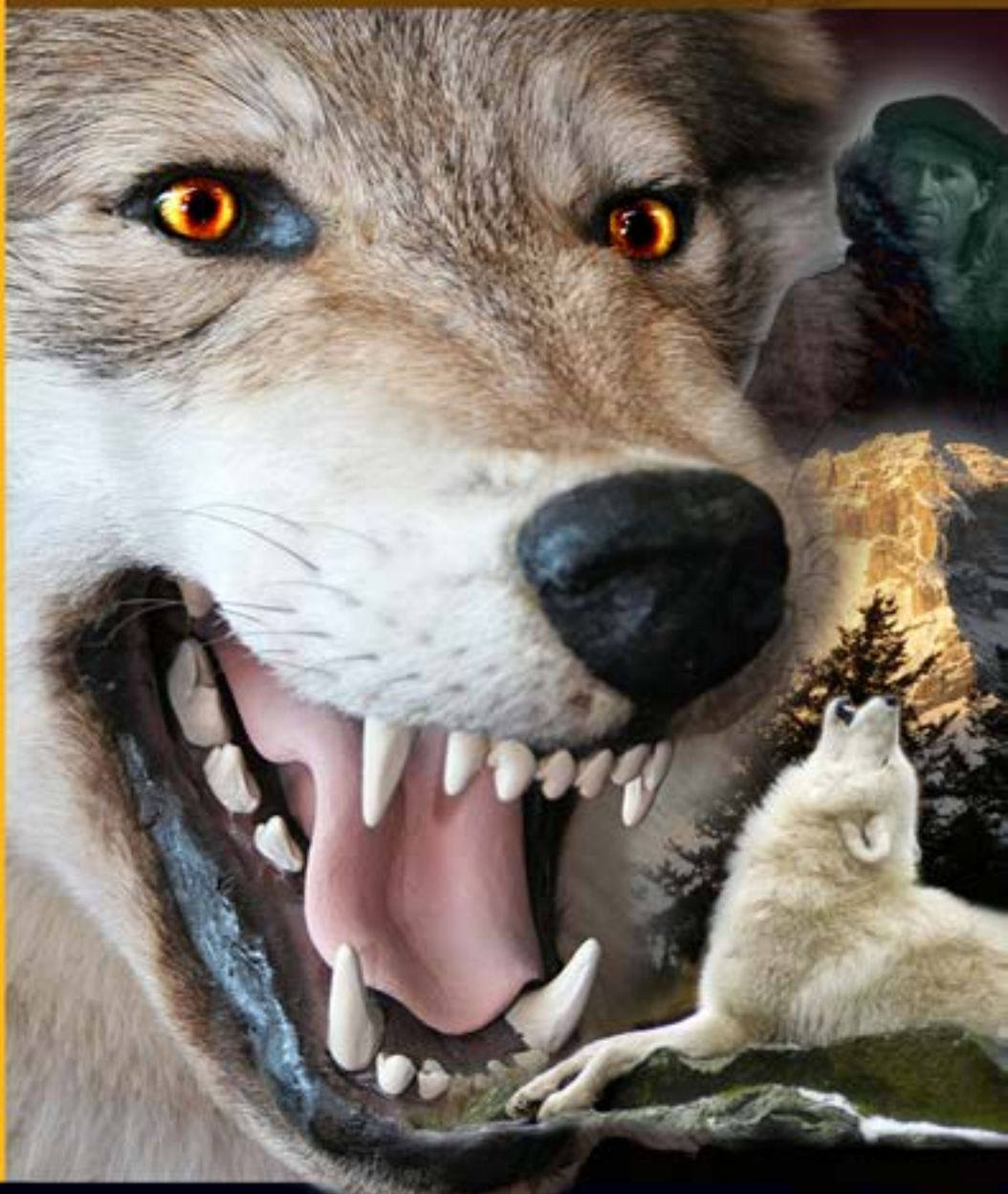
Prestwick House Literary Touchstone Classics

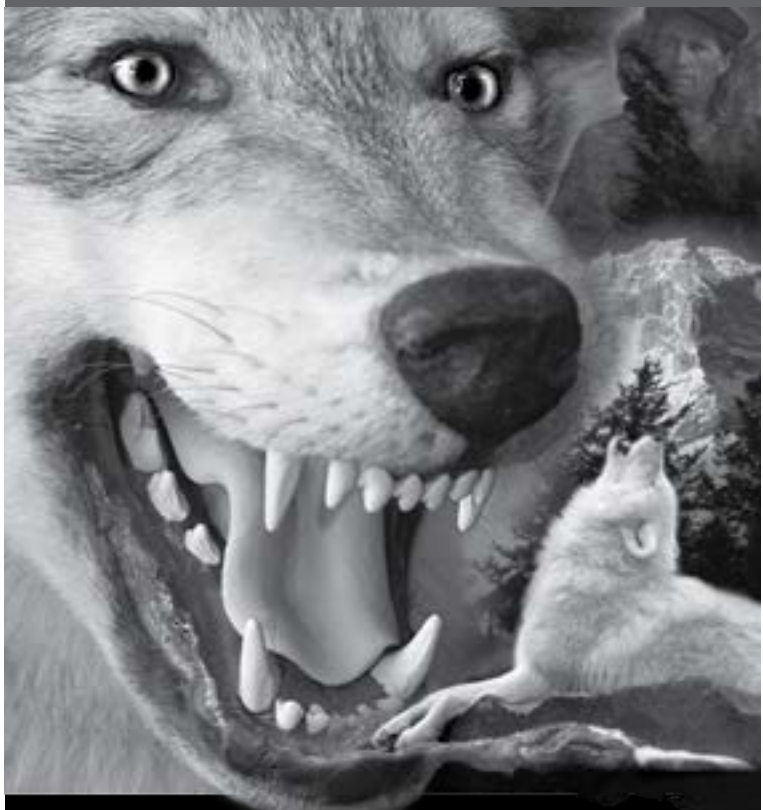
White Fang

by Jack London



UNABRIDGED WITH GLOSSARY AND NOTES

White Fang



Jack London

Prestwick House

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WHITE FANG

JACK LONDON

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NOTES

What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

Jack London was born in San Francisco, California, on January 12, 1876. His father deserted his family when he was still a child, and London was raised by his mother and stepfather in Oakland, CA. At the age of 14, London left school for a life on the road. For five years, he worked as a seaman, rode in freight trains along the West Coast, and became an avid member of the Socialist Party. At 19, though, he dedicated himself to self-education in public libraries and gained admission to the University of California-Berkeley as a special student. During this time, he began to write short stories and political essays.

In 1901, he ran unsuccessfully for mayor of Oakland. Following the defeat, he shifted his attention to writing longer works, including *The Call of the Wild* (1903), *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), *White Fang* (1906), and *Burning Daylight* (1910). London became one of his generation's most prolific writers, exploring the cultures and geographies of the Yukon, California, the South Pacific, and England. He died on his ranch of kidney disease on November 22, 1916.

Pointers

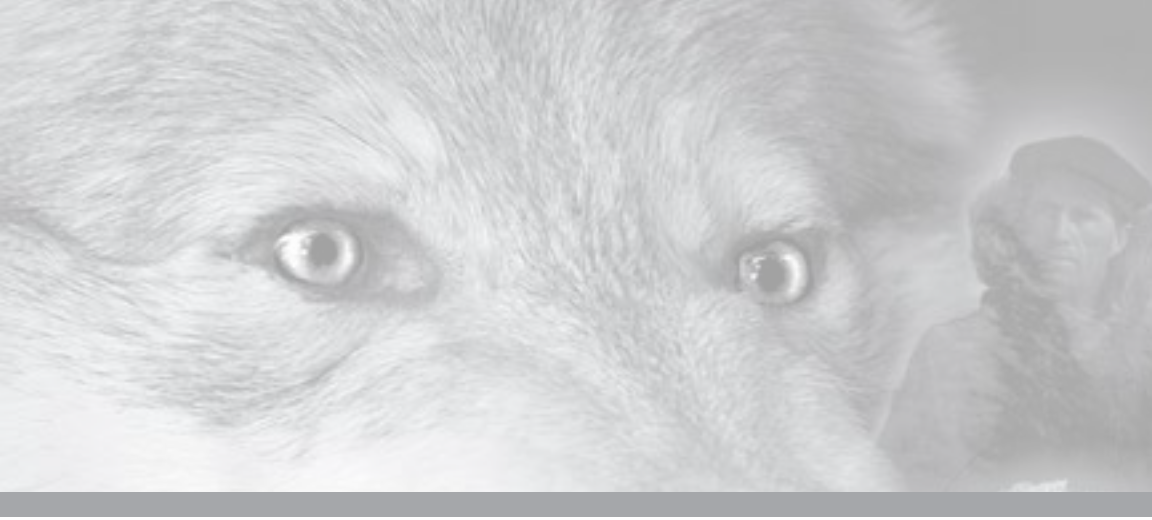
Reading Pointers

Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

As you read *White Fang*, pay attention to the following:

- The main characters in the novel, both dogs and people, represent various facets of human existence. *White Fang*'s main conflict is between the title character's two essences—his life as a wild wolf and his tamer dog nature. London uses this conflict in many ways, both to depict White Fang's struggles in the novel and also to comment upon human nature.

- The idea that unconditional love and affection can overcome heredity and upbringing is another aspect of humanity that London emphasizes through White Fang's actions. White Fang's harsh treatment gives free rein to the dog's ferocity, yet when he is petted, fed, and loved, his mild and loving behavior triumphs. London offers differing opinions as to whether creatures are "molded" from birth and can do little to change their situation. Beauty Smith "had not created himself," so in some ways he is not to blame for his treatment of White Fang. White Fang is a cruel killer when he is kept and tormented, but the dog turns out to be kind and becomes a pet when the Judge is his master. Therefore, White Fang is not responsible for his actions; he is merely doing what his present circumstances dictate. *White Fang* offers two opposing viewpoints about this: Laws understood from birth demand obedience, but they can be altered. White Fang must be exactly what he is—a wolf that depends on killing to survive. He tests his boundaries at every opportunity, often running into obstacles—both literal and metaphorical—and he is constantly chafing at his hereditary constraints. London, however, does not offer an opinion that one method of living is superior to the other.



PART I

CHAPTER I

THE TRAIL OF THE MEAT

DARK SPRUCE FOREST frowned on either side the frozen waterway. The trees had been stripped by a recent wind of their white covering of frost, and they seemed to lean toward each other, black and ominous, in the fading light. A vast silence reigned over the land. The land itself was a desolation, lifeless, without movement, so lone and cold that the spirit of it was not even that of sadness. There was a hint in it of laughter, but of a laughter more terrible than any sadness—a laughter that was mirthless as the smile of the Sphinx,† a laughter cold as the frost and partaking of the grimness of infallibility. It was the masterful and incommunicable wisdom of eternity laughing at the futility of life and the effort of life. It was the Wild, the savage, frozen-hearted Northland Wild.†

But there *was* life, abroad in the land and defiant. Down the frozen waterway toiled a string of wolfish dogs. Their bristly fur was rimed with frost. Their breath froze in the air as it left their mouths, spouting forth in spumes of vapor that settled upon the hair of their bodies and formed into crystals of frost. Leather harness was on the dogs, and leather traces attached them to a sled which dragged along behind. The sled was without

†Terms marked in the text with (†) can be looked up in the Glossary for additional information.

runners. It was made of stout birch-bark, and its full surface rested on the snow. The front end of the sled was turned up, like a scroll, in order to force down and under the bore of soft snow that surged like a wave before it. On the sled, securely lashed, was a long and narrow oblong box. There were other things on the sled—blankets, an axe, and a coffee-pot and frying-pan; but prominent, occupying most of the space, was the long and narrow oblong box.

In advance of the dogs, on wide snowshoes, toiled a man. At the rear of the sled toiled a second man. On the sled, in the box, lay a third man whose toil was over,—a man, whom the Wild had conquered and beaten down until he would never move nor struggle again. It is not the way of the Wild to like movement. Life is an offence to it, for life is movement; and the Wild aims always to destroy movement. It freezes the water to prevent it running to the sea; it drives the sap out of the trees till they are frozen to their mighty hearts; and most ferociously and terribly of all does the Wild harry and crush into submission man—man who is the most restless of life, ever in revolt against the dictum that all movement must in the end come to the cessation of movement.

But at front and rear, unawed and indomitable, toiled the two men who were not yet dead. Their bodies were covered with fur and soft-tanned leather. Eyelashes and cheeks and lips were so coated with the crystals from their frozen breath that their faces were not discernible. This gave them the seeming of ghostly masques, undertakers in a spectral world at the funeral of some ghost. But under it all they were men, penetrating the land of desolation and mockery and silence, puny adventurers bent on colossal adventure, pitting themselves against the might of a world as remote and alien and pulseless as the abysses of space.

They travelled on without speech, saving their breath for the work of their bodies. On every side was the silence, pressing upon them with a tangible presence. It affected their minds as the many atmospheres of deep water affect the body of the diver. It crushed them with the weight of unending vastness and unalterable decree. It crushed them into the remotest recesses of their own minds, pressing out of them, like juices from the grape, all the false ardors and exaltations and undue self-values of the human soul, until they perceived themselves finite and small, specks and motes, moving with weak cunning and little wisdom amidst the play and inter-play of the great blind elements and forces.

An hour went by, and a second hour. The pale light of the short sunless day was beginning to fade, when a faint far cry arose on the still air. It soared upward with a swift rush, till it reached its topmost note, where it persisted, palpitant and tense, and then slowly died away. It might have been a lost soul wailing, had it not been invested with a certain sad fierceness and hungry eagerness. The front man turned his head until his eyes met the eyes

of the man behind. And then, across the narrow oblong box, each nodded to the other.

A second cry arose, piercing the silence with needle-like shrillness. Both men located the sound. It was to the rear, somewhere in the snow expanse they had just traversed. A third and answering cry arose, also to the rear and to the left of the second cry.

"They're after us, Bill," said the man at the front.

His voice sounded hoarse and unreal, and he had spoken with apparent effort.

"Meat is scarce," answered his comrade. "I ain't seen a rabbit sign for days."

Thereafter they spoke no more, though their ears were keen for the hunting-cries that continued to rise behind them.

At the fall of darkness they swung the dogs into a cluster of spruce trees on the edge of the waterway and made a camp. The coffin, at the side of the fire, served for seat and table. The wolf-dogs, clustered on the far side of the fire, snarled and bickered among themselves, but evinced no inclination to stray off into the darkness.

"Seems to me, Henry, they're stayin' remarkable close to camp," Bill commented.

Henry, squatting over the fire and settling the pot of coffee with a piece of ice, nodded. Nor did he speak till he had taken his seat on the coffin and begun to eat.

"They know where their hides is safe," he said. "They'd sooner eat grub than be grub. They're pretty wise, them dogs."

Bill shook his head. "Oh, I don't know."

His comrade looked at him curiously. "First time I ever heard you say anythin' about their not bein' wise."

"Henry," said the other, munching with deliberation the beans he was eating, "did you happen to notice the way them dogs kicked up when I was a-feedin' 'em?"

"They did cut up more'n usual," Henry acknowledged.

"How many dogs 've we got, Henry?"

"Six."

"Well, Henry…" Bill stopped for a moment, in order that his words might gain greater significance. "As I was sayin', Henry, we've got six dogs. I took six fish out of the bag. I gave one fish to each dog, an', Henry, I was one fish short."

"You counted wrong."

"We've got six dogs," the other reiterated dispassionately. "I took out six fish. One Ear didn't get no fish. I come back to the bag afterward an' got 'm his fish."

"We've only got six dogs," Henry said.

"Henry," Bill went on. "I won't say they was all dogs, but there was seven of 'm that got fish."

Henry stopped eating to glance across the fire and count the dogs.

"There's only six now," he said.

"I saw the other one run off across the snow," Bill announced with cool positiveness. "I saw seven."

His comrade looked at him commiseratingly, and said, "I'll be almighty glad when this trip's over."

"What d'ye mean by that?" Bill demanded.

"I mean that this load of ourn is gettin' on your nerves, an' that you're beginnin' to see things."

"I thought of that," Bill answered gravely. "An' so, when I saw it run off across the snow, I looked in the snow an' saw its tracks. Then I counted the dogs an' there was still six of 'em. The tracks is there in the snow now. D'ye want to look at 'em? I'll show 'em to you."

Henry did not reply, but munched on in silence, until, the meal finished, he topped it with a final cup of coffee. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and said:

"Then you're thinkin' as it was—"

A long wailing cry, fiercely sad, from somewhere in the darkness, had interrupted him. He stopped to listen to it, then he finished his sentence with a wave of his hand toward the sound of the cry, "—one of them?"

Bill nodded. "I'd a blame sight sooner think that than anything else. You noticed yourself the row the dogs made."

Cry after cry, and answering cries, were turning the silence into a bedlam. From every side the cries arose, and the dogs betrayed their fear by huddling together and so close to the fire that their hair was scorched by the heat. Bill threw on more wood, before lighting his pipe.

"I'm thinkin' you're down in the mouth some," Henry said.

"Henry…" He sucked meditatively at his pipe for some time before he went on. "Henry, I was a-thinkin' what a blame sight luckier he is than you an' me'll ever be."

He indicated the third person by a downward thrust of the thumb to the box on which they sat.

"You an' me, Henry, when we die, we'll be lucky if we get enough stones over our carcases to keep the dogs off of us."

"But we ain't got people an' money an' all the rest, like him," Henry rejoined. "Long-distance funerals is somethin' you an' me can't exactly afford."

"What gets me, Henry, is what a chap like this, that's a lord or something in his own country, and that's never had to bother about grub nor blankets,

Glossary

PART I

Chapter I

Sphinx – from Greek mythology, a monster with wings, the head of a woman, and the body of a lion; the Sphinx was known for killing those who could not answer its riddle. The riddle is as follows: What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening?

The answer is "man" because a person crawls in infancy, walks upright in middle age, and uses a cane during old age.

". . . **the Wild, the savage, frozen-hearted Northland Wild.**" – This is the first mention of "the Wild." Physically, it refers to Alaska and the surrounding land (particularly extending northward), where most of the novel takes place. Psychologically, however, it is used to denote a difference in mindset and living; London separates "wild" and "civilized" throughout the novel. It is a theme that permeates the book, not only in the specific mentions of "the Wild" and the language London uses in association or contrast, but also in the way characters behave and how they grow (or not) through the story. "The Wild" is contrasted with the "Southland" mentioned later in the novel. See also "Inside" and "Outside."

Fort McGurry – probably Fort McMurray, founded by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1870 as a trading post; it is located in Alberta, Canada

Chapter II

sody – carbonated water (soda), often used as a cure-all for stomach pains

quinine – a medicine used mainly to treat malaria, but also used to control shivering due to cold temperatures; it is also a flavoring for tonic water

Chapter III

Factor – a person who finances another's business; an agent. Someone would have paid for the equipment and travel expenses of the men. Now that the men have been paid their money, gambling might be a way for the Factor to get some back.

PART II

Chapter I

Mackenzie River – a river in Northwest Canada from Great Slave Lake north to the Arctic Circle; it is the longest river in Canada.

Vocabulary

PART I

Chapter I

bedlam – havoc, uproar, confusion
cessation – a ceasing, ending
commiseratingly – with compassion and empathy
cribbage – a two-person card game that uses pegs on a board to keep score
dictum – a formal observation or pronouncement
epitaph – a statement about someone who has died
evinced – showed
indomitable – unconquerable
mirthless – free of humor
ominous – menacing
palpitant – trembling
salient – the most important part
traversed – traveled through

Chapter II

accession – an increase
cogitated – thought
dogmatized – said authoritatively
fervid – heated, vehement
hue – color
lambasted – beat severely
objurgation – a strong objection

Chapter III

facetious – humorous, playful
Hitherto – until this time
malignity – ill will
maundered – talked incoherently and aimlessly
protracted – extended, long
start – a jump
waxed – increased in intensity

PART II

Chapter I

erstwhile – former
palmated – shaped like a hand with fingers extended
precipitately – with violent speed