

Buck as the “Superdog” in Jack London’s *The Call of The Wild*—— from the Perspective of Nietzsche’s Superman Theory

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Abstract: American naturalistic writer Jack London’s masterpiece *The Call of The Wild* relates the story of a dog named Buck who grows from a house-dog to a lead-dog in the wild progressively. The years since the publication have seen various theories applied to the interpretation of Buck, such as ecocriticism, environmental ethics, Jung’s theory of myth and archetype, atavism and so forth. This paper will deal with the spirit of constant self-surpassing and the will to power in terms of Buck’s change and growth as a lead-dog, which is in correspondence with the essence of Friedrich Nietzsche’s theory of the Superman. Based on the Superman spirit exhibited in Buck and Buck’s identity as a dog, this thesis labels Buck the Superdog and will make an analysis accordingly from Nietzsche’s Superman theory.

Keywords: Buck; Superman theory; Superdog

1. Nietzsche’s Superman Theory

According to Nietzsche, the Superman is self-surpassing in essence. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra* Nietzsche describes three metamorphoses of the spirit: how the spirit becomes a camel, the camel a lion, and the lion at last a child. The spirit first transforms into a camel, the load-bearing animal. The camel metaphor indicates that the first step toward the Superman lies in the acquisition and acceptance of the established knowledge, values and rules, like most people do. But these knowledge, rules and values, created not by the camel itself, may enslave it. Then happens the second metamorphosis: the spirit becomes a lion. The lion is capable of challenging and defying the entrenched values, it alone, however, is inadequate to accomplish the creation of new values. What it can do is create itself freedom for new creating. Thus comes the third metamorphosis, the child metaphor. After the holy Nay, the freedom for creating being captured, a holy Yea is needed to life for the game of creating. Eventually, the spirit creates its own world. It is clearly seen from the three metamorphoses that reverent acceptance, criticism and creation constitute the process of transformations of the spirit, a process of constant surpassing. The surpassing is a self-surpassing, the essence that makes the Superman the Superman. The will to power, “the unexhausted, procreating life-will” characteristic of the Superman, explains why self-surpassing can come true. It is the will to power that drives one to ever reinforce his life force for the sake of control and creation.

2. Continual Self-surpassing in Buck’s Journey to the Superdog

In *The Call of The Wild*, Buck’s journey to the Superdog is marked by three stages analogous to the three metamorphoses of the spirit: the initiation into the primitive and the acceptance of the law of club and fang; the defiance of this law and free life with John Thornton; the return to the wild and being a wolf leader.

2.1 The Camel Stage

At the beginning of the novel, Buck lives in the sun-kissed Santa Clara Valley--Judge Miller’s place. A pet dog as he is, Buck leads a dignified and comfortable life. Just as the author says “During the four years since his puppyhood he had lived the life of a sated aristocrat.(Jack, 1991)” When sold by Manuel, one of the gardener’s helpers, he feels fearful and refuses to eat and drink, nursing his wrath and wounded pride. The desperate resistance and failed fighting against the man in the red sweater teaches him the law of club: a man with a club was a lawgiver, a master to be obeyed. In his northward journey of trace and trail, the threat of life from other dogs

teaches him the law of fang: in the ferocious struggle for life, there is “no fair play. Once down, that was the end of you. (Jack, 1991)” Gradually, he discards his fastidiousness and moral considerations gained in his four years of Southland life, watches and learns the way to survive in the hostile Northland environment, adjusting himself to changing conditions. He will, for instance, steal stealthily and cunningly and dig holes into the thick snow for a snug sleeping place.

2.2 The Lion Stage

When led by the first masters, Perrault and Francois, Buck and his teammates enjoy the toil and take pride in their sled work and their achievements in the trail. But the subsequent heavy toil led by the second master nearly exhausts them, their enthusiasm wearing off and pride in the work dwindling away. Eventually, the ill treatment and foolish decisions of the third masters serve as the last straw. As a consequence, Buck rebels and defies the law of club, at the cost of being almost beaten to death. It is John Thornton, his last and beloved master who rescues him and gives him genuine and passionate love and free life. It is proper to say that Buck creates himself freedom by the defiant act. Life with John Thornton is happy and free of drudgery. They go hunting, fishing and wandering in the wild. It is the free life that provides him with the opportunity of roaming in the depth of the forest and running side by side with a wolf a day and night, which contributes to the revival of wildness in Buck and his increasing eagerness to respond to the call of the wild. A long period of convalescence and further discipline in the wild also contribute to Buck’s perfect physical condition. Before leaving Thornton, “he is in full flower, at the high tide of his life, overflowing with vigor and virility. (Jack, 1991)” All these pave the way for his future glory in the wild.

2.3 The Child Stage

Buck is free when living with John Thornton, for Thornton never restricts him to certain work or labor. What restrains him from returning to the wild is his great love for Thornton. In other words, Buck is torn between the eagerness to respond to the luring and thrilling call deep in the forest and his profound affection for Thornton, but Thornton’s killing by the Yeehats breaks the last tie that binds him to human beings, so overpowering is his rage at the murder of Thornton that he ferociously avenges himself on the murderers. Having accomplished the last task, he answers the call of the wild and joins the wolf pack, obtaining a symbolic rebirth and a totally new identity. During years of clashes with human beings, Buck is feared by the Yeehats and given a name Ghost Dog, and even owns a certain valley that human beings never dare to enter. In the wild, as the leader of the wolf pack, he creates his own kingdom and becomes a living legend.

Buck’s life experience is the journey of becoming the Superdog through continual self-surpassing. He first accepts the law of club and fang, then creates freedom for the further revival of his wildness by defying the law and at last creates his own kingdom as a wolf in the wild.

3. The Will to Power--Buck’s Another Nature as the Superdog

The will to power on Buck’s part constitutes another feature that reveals the nature of Buck as the Superdog. It shows itself in Buck’s great vitality and his strong desire for leadership.

3.1 Buck’s Great Vitality

Though leading an easy and peaceful life in the South, he saves himself from becoming a mere pampered house-dog, by means of hunting and outdoor delights which keep down the fat and harden the muscles. When he is sold to the North, the severe Northland environment stimulates him to enhance his constitution rapidly. The struggle for survival contributes to his hard muscles as iron, his powerful digestive system, remarkably keen sight and scent, acute hearing and sharp teeth. The life force of Buck is constantly in wax. He equals and then exceeds the huskies in strength, savagery and cunning. His strength, ferocity, marvelous quickness and agility, cunning, intelligence, plus an experience gained in the fiercest of schools, earn him acknowledged supremacy wherever he is seen. He even feels superior to man. After killing numerous Yeehats, “he is aware of a great pride in himself--a pride greater than any he had yet experienced. He had killed man, the noblest game of all, and he had killed in the face of the law of club and fang. (Jack, 1991)” He feels proud because he deems this deed as a symbol of breaking and creating something and feels the sense of control, which is the essence of the will to power.

3.2 Buck’s Strong Desire for Leadership

Buck’s strong desire for leadership springs from the same mentality. The clash for leadership is visible between him and Spitz. However, his way of attaining the position of lead-dog takes on a cunning appearance. He first conceals his strength to delude his rival, then openly threatens Spitz’s leadership in the way of interfering between Spitz and the culprits in the dog team. With his covert mutiny, a general insubordination springs up and increases. When the occasion arises for the decisive battle for mastery, Buck

resorts to all his force and fierceness to deal deadly blows to his rival, assuming the due leadership. As the lead-dog, Buck displays prominently his competence for leadership. Wherever judgment is required, he does quick thinking and quick acting; he gives law and makes his teammates live up to it, disciplining them and administering punishment mercilessly and effectively, so that the general tone of the team picks up immediately and the old-time solidarity is restored. More than once, his team sets new records in the trace under his leadership. Leadership endues him with the feeling of control and constant creation, helping him give full play to his strength and intelligence.

4. Conclusion

Zarathustra says “The Superman is the meaning of the earth. (Nietzsche, 1999)” As the essence of the Superman lies in self-surpassing, the proper understanding of the sentence should be like this: all the creatures on the earth are supposed to keep surpassing themselves. Undoubtedly Buck is such a qualified creature. His life is a legendary one characteristic of constant self-surpassing from a house-dog to a sled-dog leader to a lead-wolf. He has strong will to power that manifests itself in his continual and conscious reinforcement of physical strength, intelligence, and quick perception and response and his ambition for leadership for the sake of greater achievements, the feeling of control and doing justice to his talents. Based on the two points above mentioned, it is safe to say that as a dog, Buck is the Superdog.

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