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The Call of Masculinity

Haylee Florkey

Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* tells the story of Buck, a California dog who rediscovers his primal instincts after being taken to Alaska during the Yukon Gold Rush. It deals with the themes of reclaiming one's inner self and returning to the origins of nature. It is a celebration of the individual, but there is a bit of an issue with this narrative. *The Call of the Wild* is misogynistic because it portrays female characters as stereotypically domestic, soft, and weak, poking fun at femininity as a whole and pushing the narrative that women are naturally second-class to men because they are incapable of succeeding in their journeys to find their inner selves.

When Buck is introduced, he is immediately set apart from the other dogs in Judge Miller's household. Buck's superiority is taken at the expense of at least one female dog from the very beginning. Ysabel, who is presumably female based on the origins of the name, and another dog Toots, whose gender is unknown, stay inside Judge Miller's house all day "protected by a legion of housemaids armed with brooms and mops" ("Ysabel;" London, 2010). Although Buck hasn't begun to reclaim his inner "primordial beast" yet, he already looks down on these household dogs as "he was king" (London). He is better than Ysabel before he goes through any character development. He is also superior to the pack of hunting dogs, but it is the female housedog that is named and made a spectacle. Buck is elevated to protagonist status off the backs of dogs like Ysabel who wouldn't even think of reclaiming their inner selves. With that, the ground begins to tremble as the first pebble rolls down the mountain in the wake of skewed comparisons.

Leaving Ysabel behind in the Southland, Buck befriends a Newfoundland named Curly on his journey north. Immediately, discrimination against Curly is romanticized as a catalyst for Buck's journey to self-actualization. Curly's death at the paws of a band of huskies teaches Buck that, "Once down, that was the end of you" (London). There is nothing inherently misogynistic about killing off a female character, but how Curly dies is rather irksome. Her only transgression is her friendly, agreeable nature. She is more submissive, and this trait is traditionally perceived as more feminine. Her pitfall ultimately comes from being too feminine. Secondly, she is never allowed to defend herself while later on in the book Spitz, a male dog, faces a similar situation, facing Buck while enemies circle him, but he is allowed to fight until his legs are broken in the stand of a true warrior (London). Curly does not receive the dignity in her final moments that a male dog does. Her death is the second rock before the avalanche—a dog too weak to even begin her journey back to nature.

The indignities found in death do not stop with Curly either. Dolly, one of the original sled dogs, is portrayed as weaker-willed than her male counterparts. One of the fundamental stepping stones on Buck's journey is finding pride in the work of a sled dog, "the toil of the traces" (London). This same toil that the male dogs so reverently uphold presumably causes Dolly to go mad (London). The female dog cannot handle the work with which the male dogs take no issue. She, unlike Ysabel

and Curly, begins her journey of self-actualization but is still too weak to finish it. Additionally, when she can no longer work, Francois kills her with an ax in front of the team of dogs even though later on in the novella Dave, who is physically unwell, is allowed to continue at his job until he can no longer move before he is disposed of privately with a single shot (London). There is once again an uneven parallel, a stone rolling down a hill, between the deaths of a male and female dog.

The differences in portrayal between male and female characters continue throughout the novella, not only in the dogs but also in the human characters. Mercedes, one of Buck's owners, is a paragon for damsels in distress. She teeters constantly between crying and complaining and insists on riding on the sled which is one of the major reasons that the dogs are driven to near death by exhaustion because "[i]t was her custom to be helpless" (London). Hal and Charles are equally unprepared to deal with the wild frontier of Alaska, but they don't crack under the pressure. If anything, they become harder. This continues the trend of female characters falling short whereas male characters carry on. However, even more telling is that Mercedes is a direct parallel to the figurative animal that Ysabel represents. Ysabel has her set place in the house which she has no opportunity to rise from as she is constantly protected, and she seems to have no concept that she *can* rise above where she is. Ysabel never dared to leave the house, and Mercedes shows the outcome if she had. The woman who dares to leave her place in the comfort of her home is destined to fail. London consistently shows that their temperament is too soft and domestic to put in the work required for the journey to the self. These two are simply too frivolous to begin to understand the importance of knowing one's true self—the ground is beginning to shake as the rocks tumble.

Also, the inconsistencies, not only, lay in the portrayal of female characters but in the general portrayal of femininity. Billee is a male husky who shares many similarities with the female characters—overt friendliness, expression of his emotions through crying, and death by an ax, and his femininity is often the butt of the joke from the narration standpoint. Spitz constantly taunts him because of his placating nature, and he runs away rather than fight when the rabid huskies attack the camp (London). He may be a male dog, but he receives the same treatment as the female characters because of his natural temperament. His highlighted character trait is cowardice, but it is forgotten seemingly by the narration itself that Buck would have likely frozen to death if he hadn't found Billee curled up in his den in the snow (London). Yet, the savior of the protagonist is persecuted by both the characters and the narration alike for his natural temperament—his femininity. The trees are cracking as the rocks roll under the weight of another skewed comparison.

Most revealingly, the protest against femininity is not limited to the transient side characters. Buck has the aspects of his personality that could be viewed as more feminine stamped out on his journey to self-actualization. While at Judge Miller's estate, Buck ". . . escorted Mollie and Alice, the Judge's daughters, on long twilight or early morning rambles. . ." and ". . . carried the Judge's grandsons on his back, or rolled them in the grass. . ." (London). Buck was a caretaker, a traditionally feminine trait, but he reinvents himself during his time in Alaska and loses this aspect of himself. His memories of the Southland have ". . . no power over him" (London). He sheds all the softer and more domestic facets of his personality to finally adopt the role of the fearsome warrior and respected alpha of the wolf pack.

The stones of misogyny stutter to a halt at the bottom of the slope with this point: None of the female characters are strong enough to tap into their inner "primordial beasts" (London). They are either too weak to make it to the finish line or too domestic to even try. There is nothing wrong with celebrating masculinity, but it should not come at the expense of femininity. The portrayal of female characters in *The Call of the Wild* repeatedly ranks them below the male characters in terms of competence and dignity; therefore, creating an archaic image that places women inferior to men. This image cannot stand if a world is desired where all aspects of gender are celebrated.

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