

# Unit 6 The Call of the Wild



# Background information

Jack London (1876-1916) was born in San Francisco and brought up in hardship and poverty, never able to get much formal education. In spite of this, he was a greedy reader, and he constantly borrowed books from the public library. In 1897, he followed the groups of men who rushed to Alaska. He found no gold there, but his experiences gave him material for many of his famous stories, including his most widely read novel *The Call of the Wild*. At first, however, for several years he met only with discouragement when he was trying to sell his stories and novels. Then suddenly his writings began to be accepted, and Jack London soon became one of the most highly paid writers in the United States. He continued to live a dangerous and extravagant life of adventure he wrote about in his stories, and when he died at forty he had spent or given away all his wealth.

Jack London's tales of rough adventure and danger are widely read even today, and his books and stories have been translated into many languages. This great adventure writer had a strong influence on American writing. He brought new themes into fiction and popularized the brutal tales of courageous men in wild places.

# About the story:

*The Call of the Wild* was published in 1903. It is a nature story, featuring a domestic dog that is drawn back to live with a wolf pack in the wilderness. Receiving instant critical acclaim, it became the first of London's best sellers and remains the best known of his writings. In the story, London gives expression to the idea of the law of domination by the strongest.

# About the Gold Rush:

The Gold Rush in Canada (1897-1898) was one of the gold rushes that took place in about the second half of the 19th century. A gold rush is characteristic of swarming in of prospectors (探矿人), merchants, adventurers and others to newly discovered gold fields.

# Text Comprehension

- When did the story happen?
- What made the year 1897 so special?
- What was Buck's life like in the sunny valley?
- Buck was kidnapped to the north. There, he was sold to a dog dealer. He was beside himself with anger, so he attempted to attack the dog dealer. But unfortunately, he did not succeed. Every time, he was hit heavily by the club. At last, he gave up and pretended to be obedient. But, did he give in?
- What caused the fight between Buck and Spitz? What interrupted their fight that night?
- When Buck fought bravely with the pack of Indian dogs, what was Spitz doing? And what were the other sledge-dogs doing?
- Since Françoise refused to allow Buck to be the lead dog at the very beginning, how did Buck manage to do it?

# Topics for discussion

How do you understand the sentence "Buck was beaten (he knew that) but he was not broken"?

Suggested answer:

This sentence is very expressive, impressive and telling. With the choice of neat-looking and nice-sounding words "beaten" and "broken", which also give the effect of alliteration, this sentence contains profound meanings. Buck was fully aware that he was punished for his furious rebellion, clubbed cruelly by the fat man in a red coat. He was beaten up relentlessly, with bleeding wounds all over his body, so much so that he stopped rebellious jumping up and over in the end. Nevertheless, "he was not broken": his backbone remained solid and strong; his marrow kept wholesome and intact; his spirit was not destructible at all. The wildness in him was still forceful enough to be developed in the northern wilderness. Outwardly Buck was now in a miserably weakened poor shape and condition, but inwardly he maintained his firmness and steadiness. One might do harm to his body, and yet could not destroy his mentality. It was one thing for a powerful man with a gross stick in hand to beat Buck black and blue physically, but it was quite another for the tough dog with the tendency toward the call of the wild in nature to yield spiritually.

What does “the law of club and tooth” mean?

Suggested answer:

Here, of course, both club and tooth are used in their metaphoric sense. They are indicative of cutting and hitting, biting and beating, crushing and cracking, fighting and punishing. The law of club and tooth means that the rule of action in the wild north was that of coldness, toughness, harshness, and fierceness. You are supposed to show your teeth now and then, and wield your clubs from time to time. There was no place for softness, or kindness, or gentleness, or politeness. Lenience had to give way to cruelty, friendliness to offensiveness, affection to indifference, tolerance to jealousy, sympathy to antipathy, love to hatred, generosity to hostility.

Discuss the character of Buck, of Spitz and of François and Perrault as they are portrayed in the home reading section.

**Suggested answer:**

As portrayed in the home reading section, the character of Buck is that of bravery, intelligence, shrewdness and responsibility. He is brave in fighting back against the crazy Indian dogs in defense of his own team, and he is brave in taking Spitz' challenge and overwhelming this considerable rival. He shows himself as a clever and shrewd being by avoiding starting the final dual with Spitz in front of the two men and by using artful tactics to get the better of the powerful and sly enemy Spitz. Buck is also described as ambitious, or rather, responsible, persisting in becoming lead-dog, which he earned hard and deserved well.

Spitz is challenging and offensive, full of hatred and anger. He is dishonest, attacking sideways at his "comrade" when they should be fighting in the same line against the aggressive Indian dogs. A good fighter, he is also intelligent, although he is defeated by the even better Buck.

As for the two men, François and Perrault show their qualities of being hard-working and of being fair and just with clear insight and caring for their similarly hard-working dogs.



What do you guess would have happened if the Indian dogs had not interrupted the first clash between Buck and Spitz?

Suggested answer:

Even if there had not been the unexpected interruption from the Indian dogs, the thing would still have followed its destined course. That is to say, what happened later on on that bright-moon night would have only occurred somewhat earlier. The life-and-death combat between Buck and Spitz would have been staged then and there, when and where the Indian dogs started the attack, with the mean doomed life of Spitz further shortened, and the well-deserved triumph of Buck coming even sooner. The first square clash between Buck and Spitz might very well also resulted in Buck's victory and Spitz' disappearance. For Spitz could not possibly escape his doomed fate, while it was a matter of course for Buck to win his trophy.

# Difficult Points & Solutions

1. Buck jumped at the man, sixty kilos of anger, his mouth wide open, ready to bite the man's neck.

*His mouth wide open* is here an absolute nominative structure, used as an adverbial to modify jumped at the man.

2. Buck understood that a man with a club must be obeyed, although he did not have to be a friend.

Buck came to see that one had to follow what a man with a club said, even if one hated that man as an enemy.

3. Buck saw money put into the fat man's hand,....When money was put into the fat man's hand, Buck saw this scene,....

The past participial phrase *put into ...* here serves as the object complement.

4. The wild animal was strong in Buck.

This sentence means that the tendency towards the wildness, or the nature of being wild was growing strong in Buck's heart as well as in his body.

5. But Spitz was always showing his teeth to Buck.

But Spitz was trying from time to time to challenge Buck to a quarrel and to give a start to a fight with him.

6. They were all skin and bone.

They were extremely thin, with little flesh.

Note the expressions of "be all + n." in English.

e.g. While the lecturer was speaking, the students were all ears.

Bob seemed all thumbs in doing housework, and all eyes when a football match began.

7. The wild animal had made its kill.

Buck, with the wild animal strong in him now, succeeded in killing the evil enemy, Spitz.

8. I'll show you!

I'll teach you how you're supposed to behave or what's the proper way you should act.