

# Ethical Relationship of Human and Nature in Jack London's *White Fang*

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**Mr. J. Milton Ananiya**

*Research Scholar & Assistant Professor of English  
Bishop Heber College (Autonomous), Trichy  
(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Trichy)*

**Dr. C. Dhanabal**

*Associate Professor of English  
Bishop Heber College (Autonomous), Trichy  
(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Trichy)*

### Abstract

*Ecological Crisis is one of the alarming threats of humans in present times. They have little knowledge about their ethical responsibility towards nature. Their anthropocentric attitude results in exploitation of nature which is mainly due to a complete disregard of ethics. Ethics are the code of behaviour that is acceptable for the conducive conduct or living. Owing to overweening pride, they look down upon nature and fail to empathise with their ethical responsibility to save and live amicable life with nature. Jack London, a prolific American writer, zeroes in on the relationship between human and nature in *White Fang*. The researcher tries to analyse how humans should have an ethical care towards nature through the characters in this novel.*

**Keywords:** Anthropocentrism, Ecocriticism, Ethical- Care, Symbiosis.

The cosmos is governed by the law of nature where everything is implicitly connected with other in an indecipherable way. Each thing has its own intrinsic value and a key role to play in this orderly world. Defying or overlooking of this fact will lead to disharmony which is prevalent in the present world. Numerous unsolvable problems like unemployment, global warming, environmental crisis etc., are the outcome of the disruption in the order. Humans, under the delusion of Science and advancement, look down upon morals and values which lead to disharmony and ecological crisis.

Ethics, morals and values have become obsolete words by the present world. Human- centered attitude i.e 'anthropocentrism' is the root cause of immoral and unethical values among humans. Humans have lost their amicable relationship with nature. Their immoral attitude has paved the way for disharmony and hostility between human and nature. Though various reasons are the cause for the disharmony, all things are grounded on moral and degradation.

Ecocriticism, one of the major literary movements, proclaims the role and need of harmony and relationship between human and nature. On this planet, humans and animals share the same environment. The former should respect the latter. The term 'Eco' and 'Critic' are

derived from the Greek words 'Oikos' and 'kritis' which mean 'house judge'. Cheryl Glotfelty in her seminal article *Literary Studies in the Age of Environmental Crisis* says "the study of relationship between literature and physical environment" (XVIII). Ecocriticism strongly opposes the ethical injustice caused by humans on nature in the present world.

Ecotheology, one of the branches of Ecocriticism, considers humans' relationship with nature as both ethical and spiritual. Ecotheology debunks the so called myth and fallacy that humans are the 'crown' or superior race. This concept of superiority induces humans to belittle nature and considers nature as a source of exploitation. "Ecotheology has challenged traditional theologies and given the church and its mission not only new and fresh insights but has also helped us to re-examine our reading of Scriptures and our understanding of human beings and nature" (Marak 9). One can clearly understand that humans are not the owners or rulers of the world but a steward or a caretaker in this universe.

Jack London is an iconic figure in the annals of American literature. His novels talk about the intertwined and intrinsic relations of humans and nature. London's novels always have a touch of Darwinian ideologies. He clearly affirms that humans should have an ethical responsibility towards nature. Though London's novels are known for the concept the survival of the fittest they carry a lot of ethical values regarding animal treatment in it.

*White Fang* (1906) is a classic novel of London centers on a wolf- turned dog and its relationship with humans. The dog passes into the hands of numerous men and each plays a unique role in shaping the character of the wolf – dog. London clearly projects how human character plays a crucial role in the character and response of animals. Moral values and ethics are key components because they are transformed from one to another. The visionary idea of Immanuel Kant is highly seen in this novel.

The relationship of human with nature is highly ethical. Beauty Smith, one of the owners of white Fang, lacks moral and ethical values. Smith beats animals ferociously and uses them as beast of burden to mint money. London says "Beauty Smith beats White Fang in a more cruel way than Beaver. He uses both the club and whip upon him... He experienced the worst beating ever received in life. Gray beaver was mild compared with this" (London 221). Beauty Smith always wants White Fang to be in rage. The moral less values of Smith creates a same effect in the character of White Fang. The compassionate dog is turned to a wolfish dog by the cruel nature of Smith. London underlines the kind of transformation of White Fang as,

He was kept in rage most of the time. But worse than all this was the atmosphere in which he lived. He was regarded as the most fearful of wild beasts, and this was born into him through the bars of the cage. Every cautious actions on the part of men... added fuel to the flame of his fierceness and his capacity for being was moulded by the pressure of the environment. (London 231)

Black Smith's evil character is transferred into the dog. White Fang becomes ferocious and is turned as a fighting dog. The Sole aim of Smith to transform Beauty Smith is to gain money in animal fights. When Smith realises that White Fang is no longer a fighting and winning dog he deserts it. Smith's behaviour is against the code of ethics. In the Holy Bible, God condemns men for this behaviour He says, Woe to the Shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves should not the shepherd take care of the flocks? Yet eat the curd's clothes yourself with the wool and slaughter the choice animal, but you didn't take care of the flock you have not strengthened the weak or heal the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or search for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally (Ezekial 34: 2 – 4)

Lack of moral and ethical awareness make Smith more brutal towards animals. He is no longer considered a human. Unethical behaviour leads Smith to become an animal. Not only he is brutal but also make others to become brutal. He made others to become brutal. London says "If beauty

Smith had in him a devil, White Fang had another; the two of them raged against each other unceasingly...the mere sight of Beauty Smith was sufficient to send him into transport of fury” (London 230). London shows how unethical behaviour of human beings have tremendous impact on animals. After witnessing the injustice inflicted on White Fang, Weedon Scott saves him from the hands of Smith. Scott calls Smith as a monster he says “A man got his rights. But you are not a man. You are a beast” (London 250). Weedon Scott rescues White Fang not because it can be useful but because it has a life to be rescued.

Weedon Scott’s act of kindness is out of his ethical relationship with nature. Ethical care is a movement which focuses on the roles played by humans to protect nature. Daniel in his article *The Care Ethics and Animal Welfare* says,

The reason to oppose animals suffering from the perspective of care ethics is not because we wish to maximize utility or consistently apply our rights theory across species, but because we have relations with animals and care about them. By grounding human being’s moral duties to animals in our relationship with them. (Daniel 521)

Weedon Scott ethical move towards White Fang transforms him from a wolf to a kind compassionate dog. Scott uses kindness and love as a tool to tame White Fang. He uses to talk and create an amicable atmosphere to create harmony with it. The unconditional love of Scott makes White Fang to realise the true relationship of human and nature. Scott through his ethical move made White Fang to realise he is a kith and kin to Scott and shares the same environment with him in an equal way. London vividly shows how Scott changes White Fang through his moral values. “Weedon Scott had set himself the task of redeeming White Fang or rather, of redeeming mankind from the wrong it has done to white Fang” (London 269).

Ethics play a key role in redeeming the lost relationship of human and nature. Ecotheology also insists that humans are the part of nature. It is highly evident through Weedon Scott one can clearly understand human and nature are intertwined with each other and share the same environment for our existence. All human behaviours have their own impact on nature. It is prudent that humans should prune themselves through the lens of ethics to sustain their harmonious relationship with nature. K.C.Abrahams in his seminal essay “A Theological Response to Ecological Crisis” avers,

We can no longer see ourselves as rulers over nature but must think of ourselves as gardeners, caretakers, mothers and fathers, stewards, trustees, lovers, priests, co-creator and friends of a world that while giving us life and sustenance, also depends increasingly on us in order to continue both for itself and us. (67)

God has created the universe for a purpose. He wants humans and animals to live amicably in his world. Human must understand the conviction that every creature in God created world has a right to live. It is an undeniable fact that ethics and moral values are the silver bullets to patch the lost harmonious relationship between human and nature. It is in the hands of humans to recreate the lost Eden through the moral and values.

The mighty hands of humans which kill a tiny creature must know the Almighty’s hands are waiting to wring the head of the unethical men who exploit His universe. Life is a circle.

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