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**ANIMAL COGNITION AND SELECTIVE INTERIORITY IN JACK
LONDON'S *WHITE FANG***

BA Thesis

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how Jack London constructs animal cognition and interiority in *White Fang* (1906), focusing on the uneven distribution of psychological depth among animal characters.

The literature review outlines literary naturalism, analyses animal representation in London's fiction, and introduces theoretical approaches to narrative perspective. The analytical section investigates White Fang's cognitive and emotional development through perception, learning and interaction, contrasting this with the limited interiority of other animals. The study argues that interiority is selectively constructed, positioning White Fang as a cognitively privileged figure and shaping reader empathy within a naturalist framework.

Keywords: animal cognition, interiority, narrative perspective, literary naturalism

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Introduction

Animal cognition and interiority are central concerns in Jack London's *White Fang* (1906), where the narrative grants extensive attention to the perceptual and emotional life of a nonhuman protagonist. Within the context of late nineteenth-century literary naturalism, writers such as Stephen Crane, Frank Norris and London examine behaviour as shaped by heredity, environment and instinct, often questioning the extent of individual agency. In this framework, animals become significant narrative figures through which questions of cognition, perception, and consciousness can be explored. *White Fang* (1906) is particularly notable for its sustained attempt to depict the inner life of a wolf-dog while remaining within the constraints of naturalist determinism.

The novel follows White Fang's growth from his early life in the wilderness to his eventual domestication with humans. The book is structured as a progression from wildness to civilisation. The narrative follows White Fang's life as he struggles to survive amid violence and adapts to a changing environment. This movement between different environments allows London to show better shifts in White Fang's behaviour, perception, and personality. This also forms the basis for the novel's exploration of cognition. At the same time, the narrative is selective in its treatment of other animals, presenting many primarily through external behaviour rather than an interior perspective. This perspective also shapes how the reader engages with different animal figures, guiding empathy and interpretation.

The main aim of this thesis is to analyse how London constructs animal cognition and interiority in *White Fang* (1906), with particular attention to the uneven distribution of psychological depth and its effects on characterisation and reader engagement. The first part provides an overview of prior research on animal studies regarding *White Fang* (1906), literary naturalism and London's background. The study also looks into topics such as determinism and narrative perspective. The second part consists of a thematic analysis of the

novel, focusing on White Fang's cognitive and emotional development while contrasting it with the more limited depiction of other animals.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW: THEORETICAL AND CRITICAL APPROACHES TO ANIMAL COGNITION IN *WHITE FANG* (1906)

Overview of Scholarship

Jack London's *White Fang* (1906) has generated substantial interest across literary naturalism, animal studies and narrative theory. The novel focuses on themes such as naturalism, survival and the changing relationships between humans and animals. The focus of this thesis is on the representation of animal cognition and interiority in the novel, examining how London constructs the mental and emotional life of nonhuman characters. While existing writing provides important insights into themes such as determinism, domestication and evolution, it tends to treat animal consciousness in relatively general terms. This section argues that although critics recognise the presence of animal interiority, they have not sufficiently examined its uneven distribution within the text. Three main aspects relevant to this study are addressed in the following literature review: literary naturalism and determinism, the representation of animals and subjectivity in London's fiction, and theoretical approaches to narrative perspective and interiority. Together, they create a foundation for analysing how *White Fang* (1906) builds animal thought processes and decides which characters are given which cognitive traits, depth and attention.

1.1 Literary Naturalism, Determinism and Jack London

White Fang (1906) constructs behaviour through processes of instinct, environment and learning; therefore, its depiction of animal cognition is closely tied to the principles of

literary naturalism. Literary naturalism emerged from realism in the late nineteenth century (Link, 2011: 80). As Campbell (2011: 499) explains, naturalist fiction includes characters whose lives are shaped by “their heredity, their environment and chance circumstances that rarely work in their favour.” In the same text, Campbell (2011) questions the very possibility of free will. This theme is relevant to analysing *White Fang* (1906), in which behaviour is consistently framed as a product of instinct, environmental pressure, and learned experience. As Campbell (2011: 499–500) explains, naturalist texts typically present characters whose lives are determined by external conditions rather than free will, reflecting a broader deterministic worldview. Common themes include violence, the issues of survival and the indifference of both nature and society. The settings are often located in harsh environments such as urban poverty or the wilderness (Campbell, 2011: 499–500). At the same time, Campbell (2011: 500–501) highlights that naturalist writing frequently explores recurring themes such as the environment, the body, and systems of power or control, showing how individuals struggle within larger forces they cannot fully understand or resist. Rather than describing ordinary life, naturalist narratives often place characters in situations of poverty or environmental hardship. This is to uncover what dictates behaviour. In the same text, Campbell (2011: 499) also notes that naturalistic fiction “forced readers to confront the indifference of nature, and [...] the indifference of human beings toward their fellow creatures”. Such representations question more optimistic literary traditions by showing a world in which suffering is not rewarded, and the outcomes are not always morally just.

London has a distinctive outlook within this tradition. Other naturalist authors, like Crane and Norris, primarily focus on human characters. For example, Crane wrote stories on the lives of coal miners, while London applied naturalism to animals as well (Pizer, 2006: 189–194). London’s stories emphasise heredity, environment and survival, which Campbell identifies as central to naturalism (2011: 499–500). London’s inclusion of animals broadens

the scope of naturalism and raises new questions about how cognition, instinct and behaviour can be represented across species.

London's biographical background further informs this emphasis and has been widely documented. London was born into poverty in San Francisco, where he worked strenuous jobs that exposed him to hardship and the struggle to survive (Labor 2013: 7-9). In *Jack London: A Biography*, Dryer (2002: 9–12) writes how his journey to the Klondike Gold Rush in 1897 deepened his fascination with harsh natural environments. The extreme cold, hunger, illness and physical exhaustion he endured left a lasting impression on him and are reflected in the hostile settings of *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906) (Dryer, 2002: 10). While these factors of his personality and upbringing serve to connect him to other naturalist writers like Norris and Crane, they also differentiate him. When looking at London's *Call of the Wild* (1903), *White Fang* (1906), and, to a degree, his short story *To Build a Fire* (1902/1908), it is clear that London exhibits a particularly strong interest in animals, especially wolves and dogs. This trait distinguishes his work from many of his contemporaries, who focused more on human protagonists. Hernandez (2022: 40–42) notes that London's stories often blend evolutionary theory with a more compassionate view of animal thought. He suggests that animals differ from humans in degree rather than in kind (Hernandez, 2022: 41). These interpretations tend to describe London's work in general terms without examining how such complexity is selectively constructed within the narrative. This thesis builds on existing scholarship by shifting attention from the presence of animal cognition to its narratively distributed ways.

1.2 Animal Representation in London's Fiction

Interpretations of *White Fang* (1906) have evolved significantly over time. Early readings, particularly those informed by naturalist critics such as Pizer (2006) and Labor

(2013), approached the novel firmly within the naturalist tradition, emphasising environmental determinism and the shaping force of heredity.

More recent scholarship has sought to challenge this strictly deterministic interpretation by drawing attention to the novel's engagement with domestication, control and transformation. Feldman's (2006: 161–164) concept of the metaphysics of caging is particularly useful in this context. Rather than viewing confinement as merely a physical restriction, Feldman (2006) understands it as a condition that shapes how a subject comes to exist and function within a given environment. In this sense, caging contributes to the development of behavioural patterns and the emergence of identity, influencing how characters interpret their surroundings. Applied to *White Fang* (1906), this view highlights how captivity and domestication can reconfigure responses and behavioural patterns. However, while this is useful for understanding the conditions under which behaviour changes, it remains primarily concerned with structures of control and does not fully address how cognition itself is represented within the narrative.

Research on London's works that feature animal protagonists has primarily focused on themes such as captivity and freedom, animal studies, ecocriticism, evolution and naturalism (Brandt, 2018; Urs, 2021; Milton Ananiya & Dhanabal, 2025; Berkove, 2004; Daniellson, 2014). In the novel, *White Fang* is shown to respond to how he is treated: cruelty makes him aggressive and fearful, while kindness allows him to develop trust and attachment. This suggests that his behaviour is flexible and shaped by interaction, rather than entirely fixed by instinct. At the same time, while this approach recognises the importance of emotional development, it does not fully address how these emotions are built through the narrative or why this kind of depth is mostly reserved for *White Fang* rather than other animals.

1.3 Narrative Perspective and Interiority

The term narrative perspective and strategies in this thesis refers to recurring techniques through which the text creates the impression of animal consciousness, including selective focalisation, explanatory narration, sensory description, behavioural interpretation, and experiential learning. Rather than merely describing White Fang's external behaviour, the narrator repeatedly interprets how and why the protagonist perceives and reacts to the world.

In this study, interiority refers to both the mental capacity and depth of characters, as well as the degree to which a character's mental life is made accessible to the reader through narrative representation. Interiority depends on how the text frames and interprets behaviour, rather than on what a character is objectively capable of.

Earlier works on animal cognition and narrative perspective have given an important framework for analysing London's representation of White Fang's inner life. Armstrong (2008: 195–197) argues that depictions of animal thought processes are shaped by anthropomorphic narrative conventions. In the same text, Armstrong also suggests that from this perspective, representations of animal thought risk either over-the-top anthropomorphism or the complete denial of nonhuman subjectivity. Danielsson (2013: 121) describes how Jack London's work can be viewed through the context of early twentieth-century debates about anthropomorphism. In 1907, Theodore Roosevelt and John Burroughs criticised authors who attributed human-like qualities to animals, accusing them of being 'nature-fakers' (Danielsson, 2013: 121). London became a central figure in this controversy and responded by rejecting the idea that animals are merely mechanical beings governed solely by instinct. He argues that such a view is limited and overly human-centred, positioning his own writing as an attempt to represent animal behaviour in a more complex and scientifically grounded way (Danielsson, 2013: 121–122). The tension over how to make the reader empathise with the nonhuman protagonist without overly humanising them is particularly relevant to *White*

Fang (1906). London attempts to depict animal consciousness while remaining within a naturalist framework. He navigates this tension through narrative focalisation. Rather than attributing human language or abstract reasoning to the main characters, he constructs White Fang's mental life through sensory inputs, his instincts and experiences. White Fang's thinking is often explained by showing how he learns from his surroundings and adjusts his behaviour. This gives the reader a sense of what is going on in his mind, while it still feels different from how humans think. At the same time, the narrator helps the reader understand how White Fang sees and reacts to the world.

However, London is not entirely successful in avoiding anthropomorphising his characters. Lundblad (2009: 496–497) theorises that many authors who focus on animal studies try to draw clear lines between man and animal, but in doing so, the lines blur. In *White Fang* (1906), London tries to avoid anthropomorphising his protagonist by reminding the reader that his thought processes are unlike a human's. This tension is not resolved but continues throughout the novel, as the narrative both limits and expands how animal thinking is shown.

Narrative theory is important to understanding how this interiority is shared across the text. Herman's (2012: 208–210) concept of 'degrees of mind attribution' refers to the uneven way in which narratives assign mental states, thoughts and emotions to different characters. In London's book, some animals are afforded deeper thought and conflicting emotions, while others are simply described. Interiority, therefore, is not an inherent quality but a function of narrative representation. This is particularly important in *White Fang* (1906), where the protagonist is granted greater depth than other animals.

In *White Fang* (1906), domestication is portrayed as a transformative process that reshapes behaviour and emotional capacity. While the protagonist's early experiences in the wilderness emphasise instinct and survival, later interactions with humans introduce new

forms of emotional response, including trust, loyalty, and attachment. These developments suggest that cognition and emotion are shaped not only by heredity but also by experience and social interaction. However, this form of development is again largely reserved for White Fang, reinforcing his exceptional status within the narrative.

In animal studies, there has been a growing shift away from interpreting animals primarily as stand-ins for human concerns. Lundblad (2009: 496) critiques interpretations that reduce literary animals to “men in furs,” arguing that such readings overlook the ways animal figures challenge anthropocentric assumptions. In London’s writing, the relationship between humans and animals, especially White Fang’s bond with Weedon Scott, makes the usual idea that humans are above animals less clear, and suggests that animals also have some level of control and independence. Applied to White Fang, this perspective encourages a reading that recognises the wolf-dog not merely as a symbolic figure, but as a character whose constructed interiority plays a central role in the narrative.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives establish the conceptual framework for the present study, as they provide the key analytical tools for examining how animal cognition and interiority are represented. Existing scholarship has explored *White Fang* (1906) through naturalist, domestication and animal studies, but relatively little attention has been paid to how London selectively distributes cognitive and emotional interiority among animal characters. This thesis examines this gap by analysing how White Fang is granted a more complex mental life than other animals in the novel.

2. CONSTRUCTING ANIMAL INTERIORITY IN *WHITE FANG* (1906)

2.1 Introduction, Method and Key Factors

Before proceeding to a close analysis of *White Fang* (1906), it is necessary to clarify the novel's narrative structure and the scope and limitations of the present study. *White Fang* is not narrated from a single, stable point of view. Instead, the novel shifts the focalisation across three main perspectives: at the start, an external narrator observing the natural world; then *White Fang*'s mother and father, Kiche and One-Eye; and *White Fang*. These shifts are not evenly distributed, nor are they applied with equal depth – over half of the book is spent with *White Fang*. This section examines the narrative strategies through which London constructs *White Fang*'s cognitive and emotional interiority compared to other animals, drawing on examples from across the book.

The novel features a wide range of animal figures, including the earlier-mentioned One-Eye and Kiche (London, 1906: 102; 68), domesticated dogs like Lip-lip and the sled team (7; 124–147), prey animals such as rabbits and ptarmigans (92–95), and predators including the lynx, weasel and hawk (98–106; 94–95). These animals remain largely behavioural, and their actions are only externally described. As a result, they lack agency compared to *White Fang*. The narration does not expand on their own interiority; their function in the book is as catalysts for *White Fang*'s development. In contrast, *White Fang* is consistently depicted through detailed accounts of learning, establishing a clear hierarchy of interiority within the novel.

The analysis is organised thematically into categories such as classification, observation and inherited memory. These are not presented as discrete mental processes within the narrative itself, but as analytical tools that make visible how cognition is constructed. They are interconnected – observation provides the basis for classification, while

inherited memory shapes the interpretation of new experiences. This structure allows for a clearer examination of how White Fang's thought processes gradually develop, while also contrasting with other animals, whose mental states remain largely unexamined. In this way, the analysis demonstrates that cognitive depth in the novel is not inherent but selectively attributed through narrative strategy.

It is important to acknowledge that White Fang is the protagonist of the novel, and therefore receives the most narrative attention. This alone does not explain the distribution of cognitive depth in the text. As the narrative follows One-Eye, Kiche, and White Fang's human masters, they are given moments of focus in which the narrator could potentially provide similar insights. However, this possibility is rarely developed. Even in sections where their actions suggest fear, awareness or attachment, the narrative generally limits them to externally described behaviour. This demonstrates that the richer representation of White Fang's inner life is not merely a consequence of narrative focus but the result of deliberate choices regarding where and how interiority is constructed.

Finally, it should be emphasised that this analysis does not seek to determine whether London's representation of animal cognition is scientifically accurate. The focus is literary rather than biological.

2.2 Instinct versus Learned Behaviour

A key theme in *White Fang* (1906) is how instinct and experience work together. Although this fits within the ideas of literary naturalism, London does not treat them as completely separate or opposing forces. Instead, White Fang's behaviour develops through a constant interaction between what he inherits and what he learns. Instinct gives him a starting point, but it is shaped and changed by what he goes through. Because of this, White Fang

comes across as more complex than a purely instinct-driven animal, and his behaviour cannot be explained by instinct alone.

Danielsson (2013) similarly reads *White Fang* as tracing a form of development shaped by evolutionary inheritance and experiential learning. From this perspective, *White Fang*'s behaviour emerges through a combination of inherited instinct and gradual adaptation, rather than fixed responses. However, while this approach recognises the complexity of animal cognition, it largely treats such development as a general feature of the narrative. It does not fully address the extent to which this cognitive depth is narratively concentrated in *White Fang*, while other animals remain behaviourally described. As a result, the question of how this development is selectively constructed remains underexplored.

London repeatedly grants the reader access to what *White Fang* sees, his instincts, learning processes and emotional reactions in ways that go beyond simple behavioural description, for example: "He was very much afraid. Because it was unknown, /.../ He was dazzled by it /.../ This was more of the terrible unknown" (London, 1906: 87–88). This passage reconstructs *White Fang*'s emotions and what he is currently seeing into a concept he understands: the known and the unknown. The narrator does not merely state that the cub exits the cave or reacts to light; instead, *White Fang* is narrated to interpret the unknown as hostile, to experience fear, and to feel disoriented.

At the same time, the novel occasionally extends a similar, though more limited, form of mental representation to other animals. The reader briefly follows Kiche and One-Eye in the early part of the novel. Although they are not given the same level of psychological depth as *White Fang*, the narrative does attribute emotions to them. For example, "his mate looked at him anxiously" (London, 1906: 68). This suggests, first, that Kiche is capable of feeling more complex emotions such as anxiety, and second, that One-Eye is able to recognise and respond to these emotional cues. However, even though moments like this seem to hint at a

richer inner life, they are not developed further. Their emotions are simply stated and left unexplored, unlike *White Fang*'s, which are consistently explained and traced over time. This is especially noticeable since *White Fang* has not even appeared yet, raising the question of why his parents are not granted the same level of attention. This suggests that their limited depth is not due to narrative position, but rather a deliberate choice to reserve full interiority for *White Fang*. While her reactions remain instinctual, the fear is described as being inherited: "there lurked a memory of fathers that had eaten their new-born and helpless progeny" (London, 1906: 68). *White Fang*, however, combines inherited instinct with active learning. When he first encounters humans, he sees them "out of the eyes of all his ancestors" (London, 1906: 123), yet he also "watch[es] man closely, learning his ways" (London, 1906: 158), showing that inherited fear is developed further through observation and experience.

This contrast suggests that interiority in *White Fang* is not a natural quality of all animals, but something the narrative selectively constructs and withholds. This fits with Herman's (2012: 208–210) idea that narratives give some characters much more access to thought and perception than others, which is clearly the case with *White Fang*.

2.2.1 Classification

London shows *White Fang*'s thinking through classification, using it to give his thinking structure without making it the same as human reasoning. He makes this clear when the narrator says that "the grey cub was not given to thinking—at least, to the kind of thinking customary of men... In reality, this was the act of classification" (London, 1906: 97). This shows that *White Fang* does not think like a human, but still has an organised way of understanding the world. By explaining his thinking in this way, London presents his behaviour as interpretive rather than purely instinctive. What matters here is that this level of explanation is only given to *White Fang*. As Armstrong (2008: 195–197) notes, representations of animal minds have to balance between giving animals thought and

avoiding making them too human. London clearly manages this balance, but he does so unevenly. While White Fang's thinking is described step by step, other animals are not given the same treatment. Their actions may suggest emotion or instinct, but the narrative does not explain how they understand or interpret their experiences. This difference shows that White Fang's cognitive depth is not simply a result of being an animal in the story, but comes from the narrator's decision to focus on his learning and perception in detail. His mental processes are constructed through explanation, while other animals remain mostly external and unexplored.

White Fang's thinking is more gradual than abstract, drawing conclusions based on his experiences. His mind recognises patterns in others' behaviour and successfully connects them with consequences. As the narrator explains, he "merely classified the things that hurt and the things that did not hurt" (London, 1906: 85). White Fang does not ask why things happen; instead, he organises his experience into categories. This thinking process occurs when White Fang meets smaller creatures. At first, their movement and sounds make him fearful, indicating an instinctive response to the unfamiliar. Like in this description of White Fang first venturing outside his cave:

He was very much afraid. Because it was unknown, it was hostile to him. /.../ He continued to gaze, and in his interest he forgot to snarl. Also, he forgot to be afraid. For the time, fear had been routed by growth, while growth had assumed the guise of curiosity. (London, 1906: 88).

White Fang gradually makes new discoveries and changes his opinions.

What is crucial here is not simply that White Fang learns, but that the narrator explicitly reconstructs this learning process. As Herman (2012: 208–210) discusses, interiority in narrative is not an inherent quality but a function of representation. In this case, the step-by-step explanation of how White Fang moves from fear to curiosity grants him a degree of psychological depth that exceeds that of other animals. Prey animals, for example, are typically described as reacting immediately and blindly to danger, like a squirrel that

White Fang stumbles upon: “a squirrel, running around the base of the trunk, came full upon him, and gave him a great fright. He cowered down and snarled. But the squirrel was as badly scared,” (London, 1906: 90). While White Fang learns, there remains no narrative attention to how the squirrel does, even though White Fang notices it later on as well.

Importantly, this development remains grounded in sensory experience rather than abstract reasoning, which maintains the balance noted by Armstrong (2008; 195–197). White Fang’s thinking is structured and animalistic, but similar to that of a human’s in its conclusions; it is interpretive but not reflective. By making this process visible through narrative explanation, London grants White Fang a level of interiority that he does not extend to other animals, whose behaviour remains largely external. Classification, therefore, functions not only as a cognitive mechanism within the story but as a narrative strategy that supports the novel’s selective distribution of psychological depth.

2.2.2 Observation

Before looking more closely at White Fang’s observation skills, it is useful to explain how observation is different from classification. Classification refers to how White Fang sorts his experiences into clear categories, while observation comes earlier and provides the information for that process. The narrator often explains classification as structured, while observation is portrayed as more immediate and grounded in the senses. Early in the novel, White Fang reacts to the world primarily through sight, hearing, and smell. For example, when he first explores outside the cave, he “felt it, and heard it, and smelt it” (London, 1906: 86). At this point, he does not fully understand what he is experiencing, but he is clearly paying close attention to everything around him.

As White Fang gains experience, his observation becomes more focused. Instead of reacting automatically, he begins to watch and learn. When he encounters small animals, he first studies them carefully before acting, and only gradually becomes “bolder” as he realises

they are not a threat (London, 1906: 94). This shows that his behaviour is shaped by what he observes. He does not just react; he pauses, pays attention, and adjusts his actions based on what he sees. This kind of detailed observation is mainly given to White Fang. Other animals act and react, too, but the narrative rarely shows how they see or understand the world. As Herman (2012: 208-210) suggests, stories do not treat every character the same way, and White Fang is given much more attention than others. The narrator often explains what he notices and how he responds, while other animals are mostly described from the outside.

Observation is, therefore, an important starting point for White Fang's thinking. It connects directly to classification, because what he notices eventually turns into patterns and categories. By repeatedly watching and analysing the behaviour of other animals, he begins to understand how they behave and what to expect from them. This shows that observation and classification are closely linked. Observation comes first, but over time, it leads to a more organised way of understanding the world.

2.2.3 Inherited Memories

Another important aspect of White Fang's cognition is inherited memory, which London presents as a form of knowledge that exists before individual experience. When White Fang first encounters humans, his reaction is not based on anything he has learned directly. Instead, the narrator explains that he "looked upon man not alone out of his own eyes, but out of the eyes of all his ancestors" (London, 1906: 123). This sentence shows that his perception is shaped by something older than himself. Even though he has never seen a human before, he already recognises them as powerful and dangerous. In this sense, inherited memory works as a kind of background knowledge that helps him understand a new situation rather than simply react to it.

What is important here is the way London describes this fear. He does not present it as a simple reflex, but connects it to perception and awareness. White Fang does not

immediately run away; instead, he pauses and watches. The narrator describes him as “suspicious and afraid,” but also emphasises that he “did not flee” (London, 1906: 123). This hesitation suggests that inherited fear does not lead to automatic action, but instead guides how White Fang reads the situation. His fear shapes his attention and makes him aware of danger, but it still has to be developed and confirmed through experience.

Earlier in the novel, London uses very similar language when describing Kiche. Her behaviour is explained through “a memory of fathers that had eaten their new-born and helpless progeny” (London, 1906: 68). Like White Fang, she is influenced by inherited knowledge. However, the narrative does not develop this idea any further in her case. Her fear is stated, but not explained in detail or connected to any ongoing process of learning. This creates a clear contrast. Both characters have inherited memory, but only White Fang’s is explored as something that actively shapes perception and understanding.

This difference becomes even clearer when White Fang’s behaviour develops over time. After his first encounters with humans, he continues to rely on this inherited fear, but he also starts to change it through observation. The narrator notes that he “watched man closely, learning his ways” (London, 1906: 158). Here, inherited memory and experience work together. The fear he inherits makes him cautious, but his observation allows him to build a more detailed understanding. He begins to recognise patterns in human behaviour and adjust his actions accordingly.

A similar process can be seen in the way he reacts to punishment. When he is beaten, he does not fully understand why it happens, but he still learns from it. Instead of trying to make sense of the situation abstractly, he relies on memory and association. London repeatedly shows how White Fang remembers outcomes and adjusts his behaviour to avoid pain. Over time, this leads to a deeper understanding of what the narrator calls the “law of club and fang,” where White Fang recognises that humans have absolute power over him

(London, 1906: 158). Although this law is learned through experience, his earlier inherited fear makes this understanding easier to accept.

London also shows how White Fang uses this combination of memory and observation to test situations rather than simply react. For example, he often hesitates and watches before acting, especially when dealing with humans or other dogs. This hesitation is important because it shows that his behaviour is not fixed. He gathers information, compares it to past experience, and only then decides how to respond. Unlike prey animals, which “fled blindly, panic-stricken” (London, 1906: 95), White Fang’s responses are slowed down and explained. The narrator makes it clear that he is not just reacting, but actively processing what he sees.

Other animals in the novel are not shown doing this. One-Eye, for example, is described as following instincts that have been “passed down” through generations (London, 1906: 102), but the narrative does not explain how these instincts shape his thinking. His actions are presented as direct and functional, without any attention to how he understands the world. Similarly, prey animals react quickly and automatically, but their perception is never explored. The narrator focuses on what they do, not how they think.

Because of this, inherited memory alone does not create interiority. Many animals in the novel have instincts shaped by the past, but only White Fang’s are explored in detail. The key difference is narration. London repeatedly pauses to explain how White Fang’s memory, perception, and experience work together, while other animals remain largely external. White Fang’s mind is therefore built step by step, through a combination of inherited knowledge and learned behaviour.

In this way, inherited memory becomes an important part of White Fang’s cognitive development. It gives him a starting point, but it does not fully determine his behaviour. Instead, it works together with observation and experience, allowing his understanding to

grow over time. This again shows that interiority in the novel is not something all animals possess equally, but something that is carefully constructed for White Fang through sustained narrative attention.

2.3 Greater Abilities and Human-like Intelligence

Alongside processes such as learning, memory and perception, London further develops White Fang's interiority by emphasising his overall intelligence and bodily coordination. "He became quicker of movement than other dogs, swifter of foot, craftier, deadlier, more lithe, /.../, more intelligent" (London, 1906: 149). Intelligence is thus presented as something grounded in the body itself rather than as a separate mental process. One of the clearest examples of this bodily intelligence appears in White Fang's fighting ability. His movements are described as controlled and efficient (London, 1906: 193). A human-like attribute White Fang possessed was " /.../ that of correctly judging time and distance. /.../ It was all automatic." No other animal is shown to possess such great skill. Those that have similar abilities are not better than White Fang, for example, a dog from White Fang's childhood called Lip-lip was " /.../ excited by the chase and by the persistent nearness of his victim, forgot caution and locality" (London, 1906: 134). As seen from these examples, London repeatedly highlights White Fang's skills and abilities as being greater than those of the animals around him.

There is one example of an animal whose fighting abilities go beyond those of White Fang, without matching its interiority. While White Fang lives and works as a fighting dog in a dog pit, he encounters a bulldog as his opponent (London, 1906: 223–239). The narrator explicitly notes that: "For once White Fang did not make an immediate attack. He stood still, /.../, surveying the strange animal" (London, 1906: 223). This moment matters because it shows his instinct to interrupt. Instead of acting, he gathers information, compares it to what

he already knows, and only then decides how to proceed. Even during the fight, the narration follows his attempts to solve the problem: he strikes repeatedly, withdraws, and adjusts his approach, showing that his intelligence operates as ongoing evaluation rather than as a single fixed ability (London, 1906: 223–225). The bulldog receives a similar treatment, but without the added information about his mental thought process. Both White Fang and the bulldog were granted mixed emotions. “He was not used to fighting with that kind of dog,” is how the narrator describes the bulldog’s confusion (London, 1906:223). Even though there are points where the bulldog is shown to have some depth to its interiority, for example, “His whole demeanour, every action, was stamped with this purpose,” points to a mental capacity capable of having goals (London, 1906: 225). This ability is not expanded upon, as is the case with White Fang. The bulldog operates mostly on instinct, as is seen in this example: “Cherokee identified himself with his instinct. He knew that he was doing the right thing by holding on, and there came to him certain blissful thrills of satisfaction,” (London, 1906: 228). The text describes what the bulldog does, but does not explain how it understands the fight or why it persists in that particular form of attack. Its actions appear as fixed and mechanical, while White Fang’s are presented as flexible and responsive. When comparing the bulldog’s earlier-mentioned demeanour to White Fang’s, there are similarities: “White Fang sprang in, slashed, and got away untouched; /.../, but deliberately and determinedly, /.../. There was purpose in his method” (London, 1906: 225). White Fang being capable of recognising his own purpose could be the reason why he spots it in the bulldog as well. Due to the narration not being confined to only White Fang’s knowledge and thoughts, the reader does not know if the bulldog’s purpose is something White Fang attributes to it or if it is something that the bulldog itself identifies with. This contrast is not caused by a difference in what the animals are capable of, but by how the narration frames their behaviour.

London attempts to avoid giving his animal characters human-like intelligence, but he is not always successful. In the following passage, London explains that White Fang's thought processes were those of an animal's, not of a human's.

Had the cub thought in man-fashion, he might have epitomized life as a voracious appetite, and the world as a place wherein ranged a multitude of appetites, pursuing and being pursued, hunting and being hunted, eating and being eaten, all in blindness and confusion, with violence and disorder, a chaos of gluttony and slaughter, ruled over by chance, merciless, planless, endless. But the cub did not think in man-fashion. He did not look at things with wide vision. He was single-purposed, and entertained but one thought or desire at a time. (London, 1906: 108)

London tries to prevent White Fang from appearing overly human by explicitly rejecting human-like thought, but the passage undermines this effort. The act of articulating what the cub would think in human terms introduces abstract concepts, such as chaos and the structure of life, exceed other animals' cognitive frame and are similar to those of the book's human characters. Although the narrator insists that White Fang does not think this way, the language itself remains reflective. As a result, the passage reveals how difficult it is to represent animal consciousness without relying on human modes of understanding, ultimately weakening the attempt to maintain a strictly nonhuman perspective.

This becomes clearer when read in relation to Armstrong's discussion of anthropomorphism. Armstrong (2008: 195–197) argues that writers often struggle to represent animal minds without either turning animals into humans or reducing them to instinct-driven figures. In this case, London actively constructs White Fang as the exception. He avoids making animal cognition fully human by grounding it in the body, using speed, timing, and coordination, but he only develops this model in one character. White Fang pauses, observes, learns and adapts, while other animals act without explanation.

The bulldog scene, therefore, shows something more specific than just White Fang having human-like intelligence when it comes to noticing and attributing traits in others. It shows that the narration actively selects him as the only animal whose behaviour is treated as a problem to be understood. In trying not to humanise animals too much, London ends up

doing the opposite: he concentrates almost all explanatory depth in *White Fang*, which makes him appear uniquely intelligent within a world where other animals remain largely uninterpreted.

2.4 Selective Interiority

Going back to one of the fight scenes with the bulldog, *White Fang*'s behaviour is explained as a process of observation and adjustment. "For once *White Fang* did not make an immediate attack. He stood still, ears pricked forward, alert and curious, surveying the strange animal that faced him" (London, 1906: 223). This pause shows that he is not reacting automatically, but trying to understand a new and unfamiliar opponent. As the fight continues, his actions become more controlled and repeated, as "again, and yet again, *White Fang* sprang in, slashed, and got away untouched" (London, 1906: 228). This repetition suggests that he is applying what he has learned, using speed and timing to avoid danger. His behaviour is therefore presented as strategic and adaptive, shaped by observation and experience rather than instinct alone. This difference reinforces the idea that *White Fang*'s interiority is not simply a feature of being an animal in the story, but something created through narrative focus. As Campbell (2011: 499–500) notes, naturalist fiction often explains behaviour through heredity and environment, but London goes further by showing how these forces are experienced and developed over time with *White Fang*. Selective interiority, therefore, emerges as a central narrative strategy in *White Fang*. London does not treat all animals equally, but chooses to make *White Fang*'s mind visible through repeated explanation. By showing how he observes, learns, and adapts, especially in moments like the fighting scenes, the narrative gives him a level of cognitive depth that other animals do not have. This makes *White Fang* stand out not only for what he does, but also for how and why the narrator allows the reader to understand it.

Conclusion

This thesis argues that *White Fang* (1906) constructs animal cognition not as an inherent quality shared equally among animals, but as a selectively distributed narrative effect. Through techniques such as focalisation, explanatory narration, and the step-by-step reconstruction of perception and learning, London grants White Fang a level of interiority that is systematically withheld from other animal figures. While instinct, inherited memory and environmental pressure shape all animals within the naturalist framework, only White Fang's experiences are rendered as intelligible processes, transforming behaviour into something that can be followed, interpreted and understood.

What emerges from this analysis is a difference in complexity between characters and a hierarchy of minds created through narration. Other animals are not necessarily less capable within the logic of the fictional world; rather, they are denied narrative access. Their actions remain visible, but their perception remains opaque. Interiority, therefore, does not reflect cognitive reality but narrative privilege. In this sense, the novel does not simply depict animal cognition but actively produces it, determining which forms of consciousness become legible to the reader.

This selective interiority has important implications for how the novel constructs empathy. By allowing the reader to follow White Fang's gradual processes of perception, hesitation and learning, the narrative invites identification with him in a way that is structurally unavailable for other animals. Empathy is therefore not evenly distributed but guided, even controlled, by narrative attention. The reader is positioned to recognise White Fang as an individual consciousness, while other animals remain part of an externalised environment. This challenges the idea that emotional engagement in animal narratives arises naturally; instead, it is carefully shaped by narrative technique.

At the same time, this uneven distribution complicates the naturalist framework of the novel. While naturalism emphasises determinism and the shaping force of environment and heredity, *White Fang* introduces a form of individualisation through its narrative focus. White Fang appears exceptional not because he escapes naturalist forces, but because the narrative isolates and elaborates his experience of them. As a result, the novel both keeps to and subtly disrupts naturalist principles: it presents behaviour as determined, while simultaneously elevating one figure into a uniquely interpretable subject.

Future research could extend this approach by comparing *White Fang* (1906) with other animal-centred narratives, including London's own *The Call of the Wild* (1903), to examine whether similar hierarchies of interiority persist. It would also be valuable to place this analysis in dialogue with contemporary cognitive ethology, exploring the gap between literary representation and scientific understandings of animal minds. Such directions would further clarify how narrative form shapes not only what animals do in fiction, but what they are allowed to be.

Ultimately, this tension reveals a broader limitation within literary representations of animal minds. Attempts to avoid anthropomorphism often result not in equal representation, but in selective humanisation. *White Fang* (1906) navigates this problem by grounding cognition in sensory experience and learning, yet it cannot sustain this model across all animals. Instead, it concentrates interpretive depth in a single figure, producing a narrative world in which one animal becomes thinkable, while others remain largely unreadable.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Ita Lillo

Animal Cognition and Selective Interiority in Jack London's *White Fang*

Loomade kognitiivne võimekus ja valikupõhise sisemaailma kujutamine Jack Londoni teoses *Valgekihv*

Bakalaureusetöö

2026

Lehekülgi:

Annotatsioon:

Käesolev bakalaureusetöö uurib, kuidas Jack London kujutab loomade kognitiivset võimekus ja sisemaailma oma romaanis *Valgekihv* (1906), keskendudes sellele, kuidas vaimne ja emotsionaalne sügavus on loomtegelaste vahel ebaühtlaselt jaotunud. Töö eesmärk on analüüsida valikupõhise sisemaailma kujutamise (*selective interiority*) toimimist narratiivse võttena.

Töö esimeses osas antakse ülevaade kirjanduslikust naturalismist, Londoni taustast ning loomade kujutamise teoreetilistest käsitlustest. Samuti tutvustatakse uurimise meetodikat, mis tugineb narratiivianalüüsile ja loomakognitsiooni mõistele.

Teine osa sisaldab temaatilist analüüsi, keskendudes Valgekihva tajule, õppimisele ja emotsionaalsele arengule ning võrdleb seda teiste loomtegelaste piiratumalt kujutatud sisemaailmaga. Uuring näitab, et valikupõhine sisemaailma kujutamine on keskne narratiivne strateegia, mis kujundab lugeja empaatiat ja tõstab peategelase esile.

Märksõnad:

loomade kognitsoon; sisemaailma kujutamine; narratiivne perspektiiv; kirjanduslik naturalism

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