The Rise of Naturalism

The Law of Life
Short Story by Jack London

Meet the Author

Jack London 1876–1916

According to critic Alfred Kazin, “The greatest story Jack London ever wrote was the story he lived.” Before London had turned 21 he had had more adventures than a Hollywood action hero. Once he began publishing stories about his experiences, he became an international celebrity. His works, many set in the wilds of Alaska and the American West, brought before the reading public a fresh style and subject matter that proved popular and profitable.

The Call of Adventure Born in San Francisco, Jack London grew up in Oakland, California. Disowned by his biological father, he took the name of his stepfather, John London. Although a decent man, the stepfather couldn’t make much of a living, so London spent much of his youth working. Periods of backbreaking manual labor—in factories, canneries, a power plant, and a laundry—alternated with high adventure. The 16-year-old Jack became an oyster pirate in San Francisco Bay before switching sides to join the shore police. At age 17, he boarded a ship for a seal-hunting expedition to the Bering Sea. At 18, he quit work altogether to travel the country as a hobo. These escapades came to an abrupt halt when he was arrested for vagrancy in New York State and jailed for 30 days. Moved by the hard-luck stories of the men he had met on the road and in prison, London could see where his life was heading and decided to turn it around. I ran back to California and opened the books,” he explained. By the time he was 20, he had enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley and become a writer.

From Rags to Riches Although writing steadily, London could get nothing published. News of the Klondike Gold Rush in 1897 inspired him to head to Alaska in hopes of striking it rich. Instead of finding gold, however, he got a bad case of scurvy and returned home after less than a year. Still, London admitted, “It was in the Klondike that I found myself.” Equally important, he found a wealth of material and formulated the naturalistic philosophy that would make him a blockbuster writer. He shot to international fame with The Call of the Wild (1903), and within six years had produced most of his greatest works—The Sea Wolf (1904), White Fang (1906), The Road (1907), the autobiographical Martin Eden (1909), and several collections of short stories. London inspired many in the next generation of writers, including Ernest Hemingway, Jack Kerouac, and Norman Mailer.

DID YOU KNOW?
Jack London . . .
• was the first American author to become a millionaire from his writing.
• pioneered the field of sports writing.
• covered the Russo-Japanese War and the Mexican Revolution as a correspondent.
How do people face death?

Death comes to all of us, but different cultures approach the inevitable end in various ways. The death described in London’s story may seem cruel to you, but consider the cultural context of the community described in the story.

Quickwrite
Think about how your own culture treats people who are dying. Are they treated with indifference or respect? In a more hostile environment, such as a natural disaster, do you think society could maintain the same customs? In your notebook, jot down your thoughts about these issues.

Literary Analysis: Theme

Theme is the central message communicated by a literary work. It may be stated directly, but it usually emerges through literary elements as a comment on the human condition. The answers to certain questions can help you identify a story’s theme.

- What is the resolution of the primary conflict?
- What traits do the main characters display?
- What about the physical or cultural setting is significant?
- What point of view is used to describe the experiences of the main character?
- What meaning does the title convey?

Ask yourself these questions as you read “The Law of Life,” recording the answers and other details in a chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Details Revealing Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
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Review: Naturalism

Reading Skill: Analyze Author’s Perspective

An author’s perspective is the unique combination of background, experiences, beliefs, and values that influences the way a writer looks at a topic. “The Law of Life” contains echoes of London’s own life experiences in Alaska and the Klondike, where he had gone in hopes of striking it rich in the goldfields. Carefully read London’s biography on page 768. As you read the story, draw on what you know of London’s life to help you understand his perspective on such subjects as youth and old age, strength and weakness, survival and death.

Vocabulary in Context

Restate each phrase, using a different word or words for the boldfaced term.

1. need to replenish the water supply
2. a slovenly fellow, with dirty hair and unshined shoes
3. the inexorable passage of time
4. willing to attest to his honesty
5. a cat attempting to harry the mouse it caught

Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.
Old Koskoosh listened greedily. Though his sight had long since faded, his hearing was still acute, and the slightest sound penetrated to the glimmering intelligence which yet abode behind his withered forehead, but which no longer gazed forth upon the things of the world. Ah! that was Sit-cum-to-ha, shrilly anathematizing the dogs as she cufféd and beat them into the harness. Sit-cum-to-ha was his daughter’s daughter, but she was too busy to waste a thought upon her broken grandfather, sitting alone there in the snow, forlorn and helpless. Camp must be broken. The long trail waited while the short day refused to linger. Life called her, and the duties of life, not death. And he was very close to death now.

The thought made the old man panicky for the moment, and he stretched forth a palsied hand which wandered tremulously over the small heap of dry wood beside him. Reassured that it was indeed there, his hand returned to the shelter of his mangy furs, and he again fell to listening. The sulky crackling of half-frozen hides told him that the chief’s moose-skin lodge had been struck, and
even then was being rammed and jammed into portable compass. The chief was his son, stalwart and strong, head man of the tribesmen, and a mighty hunter. As the women toiled with the camp luggage, his voice rose, chiding them for their slowness. Old Koskoosh strained his ears. It was the last time he would hear that voice. There went Geehow's lodge! And Tusken's! Seven, eight, nine; only the shaman's could be still standing. There! They were at work upon it now. He could hear the shaman grunt as he piled it on the sled. A child whimpered, and a woman soothed it with soft, crooning gutturals. Little Koo-tee, the old man thought, a fretful child, and not overstrong. It would die soon, perhaps, and they would burn a hole through the frozen tundra and pile rocks above to keep the wolverines away. Well, what did it matter? A few years at best, and as many an empty belly as a full one. And in the end, Death waited, ever-hungry and hungriest of them all. 

What was that? Oh, the men lashing the sleds and drawing tight the thongs. He listened, who would listen no more. The whip-lashes snarled and bit among the dogs. Hear them whine! How they hated the work and the trail! They were off! Sled after sled churned slowly away into the silence. They were gone. They had passed out of his life, and he faced the last bitter hour alone. No. The snow crunched beneath a moccasin; a man stood beside him; upon his head a hand rested gently. His son was good to do this thing. He remembered other old men whose sons had not waited after the tribe. But his son had. He wandered away into the past, till the young man's voice brought him back.

“Is it well with you?” he asked.
And the old man answered, “It is well.”
“Is it well?” the younger man continued, “and the fire burns bright. The morning is gray, and the cold has broken. It will snow presently. Even now it is snowing.”
“Ay, even now it is snowing.”
“The tribesmen hurry. Their bales are heavy, and their bellies flat with lack of feasting. The trail is long and they travel fast. I go now. It is well?”
“It is well. I am as a last year's leaf, clinging lightly to the stem. The first breath that blows, and I fall. My voice is become like an old woman's. My eyes no longer show me the way of my feet, and my feet are heavy, and I am tired. It is well.”

He bowed his head in content till the last noise of the complaining snow had died away, and he knew his son was beyond recall. Then his hand crept out in haste to the wood. It alone stood between him and the eternity that yawned in upon him. At last the measure of his life was a handful of fagots. One by one they would go to feed the fire, and just so, step by step, death would creep upon him. When the last stick had surrendered up its heat, the frost would begin to gather strength. First his feet would yield, then his hands; and the numbness would travel, slowly, from the extremities to the body. His head would fall forward upon his knees, and he would rest. It was easy. All men must die.
He did not complain. It was the way of life, and it was just. He had been born close to the earth, close to the earth had he lived, and the law thereof was not new to him. It was the law of all flesh. Nature was not kindly to the flesh. She had no concern for that concrete thing called the individual. Her interest lay in the species, the race. This was the deepest abstraction old Koskoosh’s barbaric mind was capable of, but he grasped it firmly. He saw it exemplified in all life. The rise of the sap, the bursting greenness of the willow bud, the fall of the yellow leaf—in this alone was told the whole history. But one task did Nature set the individual. Did he not perform it, he died. Did he perform it, it was all the same, he died. Nature did not care; there were plenty who were obedient, and it was only the obedience in this matter, not the obedient, which lived and lived always. The tribe of Koskoosh was very old. The old men he had known when a boy, had known old men before them. Therefore it was true that the tribe lived, that it stood for the obedience of all its members, way down into the forgotten past, whose very resting-places were unremembered. They did not count; they were episodes. They had passed away like clouds from a summer sky. He also was an episode, and would pass away. Nature did not care. To life she set one task, gave one law. To perpetuate was the task of life, its law was death. A maiden was a good creature to look upon, full-breasted and strong, with spring to her step and light in her eyes. But her task was yet before her. The light in her eyes brightened, her step quickened, she was now bold with the young men, now timid, and she gave them of her own unrest. And ever she grew fairer and yet fairer to look upon, till some hunter, able no longer to withhold himself, took her to his lodge to cook and toil for him and to become the mother of his children. And with the coming of her offspring her looks left her. Her limbs dragged and shuffled, her eyes dimmed and bled, and only the little children found joy against the withered cheek of the old squaw by the fire. Her task was done. But a little while, on the first pinch of famine or the first long trail, and she would be left, even as he had been left, in the snow, with a little pile of wood. Such was the law.

He placed a stick carefully upon the fire and resumed his meditations. It was the same everywhere, with all things. The mosquitoes vanished with the first frost. The little tree-squirrel crawled away to die. When age settled upon the rabbit it became slow and heavy, and could no longer outfoot its enemies. Even the big bald-face grew clumsy and blind and quarrelsome, in the end to be dragged down by a handful of yelping huskies. He remembered how he had abandoned his own father on an upper reach of the Klondike one winter, the winter before the missionary came with his talk-books and his box of medicines. Many a time had Koskoosh smacked his lips over the recollection of that box, though now his mouth refused to moisten. The “painkiller” had been especially good. But the missionary was a bother after all, for he brought no meat into the camp, and he ate heartily, and the hunters grumbled. But he chilled his lungs on the divide by the Mayo, and the dogs afterwards nosed the stones away and fought over his bones.

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4. the Mayo: a small river in the Yukon Territory in northwestern Canada.
Koskoosh placed another stick on the fire and harked back deeper into the past. There was the time of the Great Famine, when the old men crouched empty-bellied to the fire, and let fall from their lips dim traditions of the ancient day when the Yukon ran wide open for three winters, and then lay frozen for three summers. He had lost his mother in that famine. In the summer the salmon run had failed, and the tribe looked forward to the winter and the coming of the caribou. Then the winter came, but with it there were no caribou. Never had the like been known, not even in the lives of the old men. But the caribou did not come, and it was the seventh year, and the rabbits had not replenished, and the dogs were naught but bundles of bones. And through the long darkness the children wailed and died, and the women, and the old men; and not one in ten of the tribe lived to meet the sun when it came back in the spring. That was a famine!

But he had seen times of plenty, too, when the meat spoiled on their hands, and the dogs were fat and worthless with overeating—times when they let the game go unkilled, and the women were fertile, and the lodges were cluttered with sprawling men-children and women-children. Then it was the men became high-stomached, and revived ancient quarrels, and crossed the divides to the south to kill the Pellys, and to the west that they might sit by the dead fires of the Tananas. He remembered, when a boy, during a time of plenty, when he saw a moose pulled down by the wolves. Zing-ha lay with him in the snow and watched—Zing-ha, who later became the craftiest of hunters, and who, in the end, fell through an air-hole on the Yukon. They found him, a month afterward, just as he had crawled halfway out and frozen stiff to the ice.

But the moose. Zing-ha and he had gone out that day to play at hunting after the manner of their fathers. On the bed of the creek they struck the fresh track of a moose, and with it the tracks of many wolves. “An old one,” Zing-ha, who was quicker at reading the sign, said—“an old one who cannot keep up with the herd. The wolves have cut him out from his brothers, and they will never leave him.” And it was so. It was their way. By day and by night, never resting, snarling on his heels, snapping at his nose, they would stay by him to the end. How Zing-ha and he felt the blood-lust quicken! The finish would be a sight to see!

Eager-footed, they took the trail, and even he, Koskoosh, slow of sight and an unversed tracker, could have followed it blind, it was so wide. Hot were they on the heels of the chase, reading the grim tragedy, fresh-written, at every step. Now they came to where the moose had made a stand. Thrice the length of a grown man’s body, in every direction, had the snow been stamped about and upturned. In the midst were the deep impressions of the splay-hoofed game, and all about, everywhere, were the lighter footmarks of the wolves. Some, while their brothers harried the kill, had lain to one side and rested. The full-stretched impress of their bodies in the snow was as perfect as though made the moment before. One wolf had been caught in a wild lunge of the maddened victim and trampled to death. A few bones, well picked, bore witness.

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5. **Pellys ... Tananas:** Pellys probably refers to native peoples who lived near the Pelly River. The Tananas are native people who traditionally lived in areas of Alaska and the Yukon.

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**THEME**
In lines 124–131, the third-person-limited point of view reveals Koskoosh’s memory of the old moose and his own reaction at the time. What is ironic about this recollection?

**harry** (här’ē ) v. to torment, often by constant attack
Again, they ceased the uplift of their snowshoes at a second stand. Here the
great animal had fought desperately. Twice had he been dragged down, as the
snow attested, and twice had he shaken his assailants clear and gained footing
once more. He had done his task long since, but none the less was life dear to
him. Zing-ha said it was a strange thing, a moose once down to get free again; but
this one certainly had. The shaman would see signs and wonders in this when they
told him.

And yet again, they came to where the moose had made to mount the bank and
gain the timber. But his foes had laid on from behind, till he reared and fell back
upon them, crushing two deep into the snow. It was plain the kill was at hand, for
their brothers had left them untouched. Two more stands were hurried past, brief
in time-length and very close together. The trail was red now, and the clean stride
of the great beast had grown short and slovenly. Then they heard the first sounds
of the battle—not the full-throated chorus of the chase, but the short, snappy bark
which spoke of close quarters and teeth to flesh. Crawling up the wind, Zing-ha
bellied it through the snow, and with him crept he, Koskoosh, who was to be
chief of the tribesmen in the years to come. Together they shoved aside the under
branches of a young spruce and peered forth. It was the end they saw.

The picture, like all of youth’s impressions, was still strong with him, and his
dim eyes watched the end played out as vividly as in that far-off time. Koskoosh

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**Theme**
Reread lines 143–149. What is surprising about the moose’s struggle with the
wolves? Consider the significance of this conflict.

**attest (a-tēst’)** v. to affirm
to be true; to be proof of

**slovenly** (slū’an-lē)
adj. untidy in personal appearance
marvelled at this, for in the days which followed, when he was a leader of men and a head of councillors, he had done great deeds and made his name a curse in the mouths of the Pellys, to say naught of the strange white man he had killed, knife to knife, in open fight.

For long he pondered on the days of his youth, till the fire died down and the frost bit deeper. He replenished it with two sticks this time, and gauged his grip on life by what remained. If Sit-cum-to-ha had only remembered her grandfather, and gathered a larger armful, his hours would have been longer. It would have been easy. But she was ever a careless child, and honored not her ancestors from the time the Beaver, son of the son of Zing-ha, first cast eyes upon her. Well, what mattered it? Had he not done likewise in his own quick youth? For a while he listened to the silence. Perhaps the heart of his son might soften, and he would come back with the dogs to take his old father on with the tribe to where the caribou ran thick and the fat hung heavy upon them.

He strained his ears, his restless brain for the moment stilled. Not a stir, nothing. He alone took breath in the midst of the great silence. It was very lonely. Hark! What was that? A chill passed over his body. The familiar, long-drawn howl broke the void, and it was close at hand. Then on his darkened eyes was projected the vision of the moose—the old bull moose—the torn flanks and bloody sides, the riddled mane, and the great branching horns, down low and tossing to the last. He saw the flashing forms of gray, the gleaming eyes, the lolling tongues, the slavered fangs. And he saw the **inexorable** circle close in till it became a dark point in the midst of the stamped snow.

A cold muzzle thrust against his cheek, and at its touch his soul leaped back to the present. His hand shot into the fire and dragged out a burning fagot. Overcome for the nonce by his hereditary fear of man, the brute retreated, raising a prolonged call to his brothers; and greedily they answered, till a ring of crouching, jaw-slobbered gray was stretched round about. The old man listened to the drawing in of this circle. He waved his brand wildly, and sniffs turned to snarls; but the panting brutes refused to scatter. Now one wormed his chest forward, dragging his haunches after, now a second, now a third; but never a one drew back. Why should he cling to life? he asked, and dropped the blazing stick into the snow. It sizzled and went out. The circle grunted uneasily, but held its own. Again he saw the last stand of the old bull moose, and Koskoosh dropped his head wearily upon his knees. What did it matter after all? Was it not the law of life?

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**inexorable**

\(\text{in-ëk’sor-ë-bol}\) adj.

re lent less

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**THEME**

Reread lines 177–185. What does the old bull moose represent? Consider the thematic message suggested by this symbol.

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6. **for the nonce**: for the time being.
Comprehension

1. **Recall**  How does Koskoosh die?
2. **Clarify**  How has he expected to die?
3. **Summarize**  Describe the conditions of life for the tribe.

Literary Analysis

4. **Interpret Theme**  Look back at the details about narrative elements you recorded in your chart as you read. Taken together, what do these details suggest about the fate of Koskoosh and all humans?
5. **Analyze Cultural Context**  Explain how each of the following factors might contribute to the tribe’s attitude about death:
   - the tribe’s connection “to the earth” (lines 57–67)
   - what the tribe sees as “the task of life” (lines 73–85)
   - the Arctic environment (lines 101–123)
6. **Analyze Point of View**  Imagine that this story had been written without any insight into Koskoosh’s thoughts. What information or ideas would be missing? With this in mind, explain whether or not you think the point of view plays a crucial role in expressing the story’s theme. Cite evidence from the story to support your view.
7. **Examine Author’s Perspective**  In your opinion, has London created a credible portrayal of the Native Americans and their values? How do you think this portrayal reflects London’s own life experiences? In developing your answer, give details from the story as well as from the biography on page 768.
8. **Compare Expressions of Naturalism**  Compare and contrast London’s portrayal of nature in this story with Crane’s in “The Open Boat.” Consider in particular the characters’ fates and any differences in tone. Record your answers with evidence from the stories in a Venn diagram. In which version of nature would you prefer to live? Explain.

Literary Criticism

9. **Critical Interpretation**  The writer E. L. Doctorow said, “It was Jack London’s capacity for really living in the world, for taking it on in self-conscious and often reckless acts of courage, that made him our first writer-hero.” Given what you have read in London’s biography and your reading of “The Law of Life,” do you agree with the notion of London as a hero? Explain.

**How do people face DEATH?**

What comment on the human condition does London make through Koskoosh's last thoughts? Do you think this attitude toward death is ultimately hopeful or hopeless? Explain.
Vocabulary in Context

\section*{Vocabulary Practice}

Determine the relationship between the first pair of words in each analogy. Then choose the vocabulary word that best completes the second pair.

1. Nurse is to care as pest is to _____.
2. Impressive is to splendid as ____ is to unyielding.
3. Agree is to contradict as ____ is to deplete.
4. Well-groomed is to dandy as ____ is to slob.
5. Refuse is to decline as ____ is to declare.

\section*{Academic Vocabulary in Writing}

\begin{itemize}
  \item apparent
  \item confine
  \item expose
  \item focus
  \item perceive
\end{itemize}

In a few paragraphs, make a case for or against leaving elderly people to die in a society such as the one in this story. You may confine your argument to practical aspects of the practice, or you may choose to focus on the relative value of life that it implies. Use at least one Academic Vocabulary word in your response.

\section*{Vocabulary Strategy: Denotation and Connotation}

Every word has a denotation, or basic dictionary meaning. Some words have additional nuances, or shades of meaning. We call such a subtle distinction of meaning a connotation. For example, the word slovenly means “untidy,” but it has a more strongly negative connotation. When you encounter a new word, analyze its context to draw a conclusion about any connotation it might have.

\section*{Practice}
The connotation of each boldfaced word makes it inappropriate in the context. Write the word from the list provided that would be more suitable in each case. Explain why the word you chose is a better match for the context.

\begin{itemize}
  \item charlatan
  \item discriminating
  \item ostentatious
  \item resolute
  \item subservient
  \item traditional
\end{itemize}

1. His \textbf{picky} taste was evident in his beautiful suits and well-chosen ties.
2. That \textbf{beguiler!} She convinced the children that she was their long-lost aunt.
3. I admire \textbf{inflexible} leaders who make hard decisions and then stick with them.
4. Her \textbf{humble} attitude impressed her employers, but behind their backs she belittled them constantly.
5. The \textbf{elegant} ballroom had more than its share of gold chandeliers, gaudy silk couches, and overly elaborate draperies.
6. The mayor espouses \textbf{reactionary} values such as hard work and love of family.
Naturalistic Perspectives

As illustrated in the short stories by Stephen Crane and Jack London you have just read, the central assumption of naturalism is that human beings have very little control over their own lives, but instead are at the mercy of the natural world and the impersonal force of fate. The following quotations all explore a similarly naturalistic attitude.

“Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed.” —Sir Francis Bacon

“It clearly matters very little to nature whether man has a mind or not.” —Eugène Delacroix

“At no time and in no place, will nature ever ask your permission.” —Fyodor Dostoyevsky

“Man and nature have such different views about the good of the world.” —George Gissing

“In nature there are neither rewards nor punishments—there are consequences.” —R. G. Ingersoll

Writing to Evaluate

Choose the quotation on this page that you think best represents the theme of “The Open Boat” or “The Law of Life.” Write an essay defending your choice, using details from the story as support.

Consider

• the main message of each story
• the subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle differences between the quotations
• which details from the story support your choice of quotation

Extension Online

INQUIRY & RESEARCH A tornado demolishes a house yet skips its neighbor; a marathon runner dies of a heart attack; a woman loses her retirement fund after working loyally for a company for 25 years. Every day it seems there is another story in the newspaper about the randomness of nature or the inability of humans to control their own lives. Search three online newspapers for stories that seem to support the naturalistic viewpoint. Print out one story to share with your classmates.

WRITING 15C Write an interpretation of a literary text.