The Call of the Wild, an Organizational Novel

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I

“Jack is going to make a success out of the Klondike—whether he digs it out of the grassroots or not,” [Emphasis added] (C. London 225) said Jack London’s stepfather after he left for the Klondike in 1897 in order to seek his fortune. As his father predicted, he finally found gold, not in the Klondike, but at his home. On December 1, 1902, Jack London began to write a new story—The Call of the Wild (or CW hereafter), which was a great hit as soon as it was published. All 10,000 printed copies were sold out on the day it debuted, and in the first half of the twentieth century six million copies were sold in the United States alone. About ten millions of copies were sold across the globe, and the novel made the author’s name world-renowned (Tavernier-Courbin 23-24).
Scholars have been studying the novel for more than one hundred years since its publication. Most scholarly works focused on its masculinity, primitive wilderness (or frontier), escapism (from the overcivilized world to the primitive world of nature), and philosophical influences such as Darwinism, Social Darwinism, and Nietzsche’s “supremacy” philosophy. For example, Franklin Walker insists that London’s strength as a writer mainly came from his frontiersmanship (13). James Lundquist emphasizes that the novel was a kind of experiment in which London wanted to test “what happens to men and beasts when they are thrust into ‘the Wild, the savage, frozen-hearted Northland Wild,’ as he terms it in White Fang” (78). According to Lundquist, the novel clearly shows London’s respect for the strong being who can survive and dominate in the wild.

According to some critics, the adventures, masculine ruggedness, and primitiveness epitomized in the novel provided readers with a virtual (or psychological) way to escape the status quo. According to them, the novel had “special appeal” to Americans “in the first decade of the century when men were forced to realize that the era of pioneering had come to an unmistakable close.” For men “whose lives industrial society has made dull and ugly and narrow, London provided the relief of vicarious adventure. He could take these people into a dreamland of heroic opportunity” (Hicks 196). Joan London, Jack London’s daughter, also emphasizes the novel’s similar/identical effect on men of Europe (including the Soviet Union) as well as of the United States where urbanization advanced rapidly (xix-xvi). Earl J. Wilcox also confirms that the quest of Buck—the canine protagonist of the novel—for life in the primitive environment is at the core of the novel (91-101).

These interpretations are, after all, arguing that the novel’s motif of escaping from civilization into the adventure of the primitive wilderness greatly appealed to readers, and as such, it contributed to its popularity.
However persuasive and accurate these interpretations are, this study is the result of a belief that an important factor has not been explored yet. In fact, as a masterpiece which “has been the most widely read American novel in the world” and “holds the attention of everyone—men and women, boys and girls, the uneducated as well as philosophers and scholars” (Tavernier-Courbin 20), *CW* has many elements—virility, individualism, primitive wildness, the Nietzschean superman, or romance to name only a few—that appealed (or still appeal) to all kinds of people. Some of those elements may not have been intended by its author, but the lack of intent does not make them less important. In fact, some of these elements surprised London later. Joan London reports that her father was surprised by the eventual popularity of his book, in particular the allegorical interpretations of it. Later, as “he reread his book with astonishment,” she recalled him saying, “I plead guilty, but I was unconscious of it at the time. I did not mean to do it” (252). This fact shows that regardless of the author’s intention, the novel leaves readers much room for their own interpretation. In fact, this open-endedness is one of the features of his novels. As Christopher P. Wilson suggests, “most of London’s fiction is hardly so one-dimensional.” Wilson insists, “we encounter a dog decivilized into a wolf, yet one clubbed into experience, allowed to resuscitate an age-old call for liberty and wildness. Buck the wolf, therefore, is educated into a language of survival and toughness, much like many London heroes” (104). In other words, decivilization and education happen at the same time. While the former may be more clearly visible to readers, the latter may not be so. Regardless of the visibility of the novel’s layers, all the elements are there and contribute to the story.

This study is essentially an attempt to find possible links between the increasing organizational life among Americans and the “organizationality” of the novel that might have contributed to its
popularity, especially in the United States. In order to prove the link, two approaches are required. One is examining the novel from an organizational perspective, and the other is finding evidence that the readers in London’s era—at least some of them—accepted the novel as an organizational one. The studies of business historians, particularly those of Alfred D. Chandler such as *Strategy and Structure* (1962), *The Visible Hand* (1977), and *Scale and Scope* (1994) discuss the increasing influence of business corporations in the American market in the late nineteenth century and the considerable participation of white middle-class men in their management. The advent of management theory, particularly that of organizational theory in the early twentieth century, also signifies that business organizations had become an important factor in American life, giving additional support to the second approach to the link mentioned above. This approach’s assumption is that, by the time *CV* was published, an increasing number of (particularly white) Americans were experiencing organizational life, and that the “organizationality” of the novel resonated with them. They may have interpreted it as an organizational novel in which a powerful leader was born in spite of great adversity.

This study, however, focuses on the first approach—the analysis of the text from the perspective of organization—while leaving the latter to another research. To reinterpret the novel from the organizational perspective, I will take an interdisciplinary approach by using organizational theories. Using these theories, I will read the novel allegorically, just as many of Jack London’s contemporary readers did. My allegorical reading may be quite different from those of his original readers, but it attempts to provide a new perspective—so a new interpretation—to the novel, and establishes one element of the probable link between the organizational American life and the popularity of the novel.
What I notice is that Jack London’s \textit{CW} is—as far as I know—the most organizational among all the novels published at the turn of the twentieth century. It clearly has all the critical elements that organization theories emphasize, and those elements are the backbone of the novel. It not only has those elements, but also the characterization and the relationships among the characters seem to be based on, or more precisely can be explained by, some organizational theories. In other words, Buck’s journey was not only to the primitive wild but also was to a series of organizations in which he interacted intensely with others.

II

Defining “organization” is not as easy as it appears, but it is not impossible to find some common ground that many organizational scholars share. All agree that an organization is a collective or coordinative system—which includes defined role and authority, and communication—of human beings. All the definitions of scholars have—explicitly or implicitly—organizational or common goals linked to intentionality. From these we can safely derive a definition of organization: a system with defined leadership and subordinates in which they communicate and consciously cooperate to achieve common goals shared by human members. From this definition four critical elements of organization can be derived: clear goals or objectives, members, hierarchy and defined roles, and communication.

Viewed with the definition of organization established so far, Buck’s sledding teams were all definitely close to formal organizations. They had members that worked together to achieve clearly defined goals, and structured systems in which roles and leadership were defined clearly so that they could communicate efficiently. On the other hand, the other two organizations that Buck was involved in right before and right after

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he joined the sledding teams had different features. The relationship between Buck and the man, who, right after Buck had been kidnapped, beat him nearly to death in order to prepare him to be a sled dog, must be viewed as one of educational organization while the team of Thornton and his relationship with Buck was closer to informal or social organization whose goal, among all the essential elements of organizations, was not clear.

III

Sledding in CV is described as a highly goal-oriented task. For example, François and Perrault’s sledding team, Buck’s first team at the Klondike, was one carefully formed for the specific goal of delivering “important dispatches” for the Canadian Government (42) from Dyea Beach to Skagway, a 560-mile run. It was not a long-lasting organization. It existed only fourteen days. For the short period, the team existed only for the goal, and all the members shared the goal and cooperated in it.

The second team led by a “scotch half-breed” (90) is quite similar to the first team. Its goal was to deliver a heavily loaded mail train to Dawson. All team members—men and dogs alike—worked “with machine-like regularity” (91) to bear the hardship and to finish the trip safely.

The third team, the gold-seekers’ team, was different from the previous teams. While the latter shared the clear goals of delivery, the former did not. The previous owners led the teams, but the dogs, represented by Buck, did not simply follow their lead but also proactively participated in achieving the goals—sometimes even with passion. On the other hand, the third owners—Hal, Charles, and

1) Jack London. The Call of the Wild. New York: The Review of the Reviews Company, 1905. From now on, the page numbers of the main text are from this book.

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Mercedes—who were unprepared for the task, had a clear but unrealistic goal of gold-seeking. The owners did not sympathize with the dogs who were completely exhausted from the previous harsh trip. As a result, they failed to motivate them to work for the goal with passion. That may be one reason for the failure of this enterprise. However, even though the goal was not shared fully among the members, the human leaders had a clear goal, and the team was led by them.

On the other hand, the relationships that Buck had with the man in red who brutally clubbed him in the early part of the novel and Thornton, who saved him from the cruelty of Hal and Charles and became his benevolent owner, are not clear in that goals for the relationships are not clearly stated. At a glance, those relationships do not appear to be organizational, but those relationships can be viewed as organizations with different goals, from those of the sledding teams.

First, Buck and the man in the red sweater are not in teamwork. Buck was just forced into the place where he was. In fact, he represents an institutional organization, more specifically, an educational institution. In order to survive in the Klondike where primitive brutality was a way of life, Buck had to be converted into a sturdy and strong dog with keen primitive instinct. Therefore, he was involuntarily thrown into a kind of MBA program. There he experienced and got prepared for the cruelty of the Klondike in advance, and learned how to survive successfully in the harsh environment of Klondike business.

At a glance, the relationship between Buck and the man with a club appears to be similar to that between Diable, a wolf dog, and its owner in a short story “Diable—A Dog” which London published in The Cosmopolitan in 1902 in that hatred and cruelty dominate their relationship. However, they are drastically different. In “Diable—A Dog”, cruelty and hostility themselves are quite strong without any reason. They just hate each other, and Leclère, Diable’s owner, treats his
dog cruelly, and the aimless animosity and cruelty eventually lead Leclère to death by Diable. They do not share common goals, and they do not cooperate to achieve them. Mutual animosity is the sole purpose (or goal) of their relationship. In other words, they retain the relationship in order to hate each other (or because they hate each other.) Their relationship is not organizational. It is just vicious cohabitation of the two hostile demonic beings in the same place.

Cruel as the man in the red sweater may be, however, he has clear goals—taming Buck so that he may be obedient to man and teaching and preparing him for the brutality of the Klondike so that he may become suitable for the missions in which he will eventually participate. The violence and harsh treatments—not only of the man with a club but also of those who carried him to the man—were virtually the first “call of the wild.” It was a call “into the primitive” which is the title of the first chapter. The primitiveness dormant within Buck from his birth was finally aroused by such an “education”. He got a painful lesson from the man with a club (21-22), and the violence and cruelty were effective methods for the discipline which aroused wildness and primitive sense and sensibility necessary for his survival in the extremely harsh conditions of the Klondike. At the same time, the discipline made him realize that he had to submit to the control of the human being who has the power symbolized by the club: “He saw, once for all, that he stood no chance against a man with a club. He had learned the lesson, and in all his after life he never forgot it. That club was a revelation” (24).

Contrary to the other relationships that Buck had before he met Thornton, that of Buck and Thornton does not seem to be formulated around a clear goal. It was personal, emotional, and familial. At the center of it was “Love, genuine passionate love” which “was [Buck’s] for the first time” (137). Thornton was different from other masters Buck had before in most ways:

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Other men saw to the welfare of their dogs from a sense of duty and business expediency; he saw to the welfare of his as if they were his own children, because he could not help it. And he saw further. He never forgot a kindly greeting or a cheering word, and to sit down for a long talk with them ("gas" he called it) was as much his delight as theirs. (137)

Clearly, the organizational type of Thornton-Buck relationship is not a formal organization in that it lacks intentionality, and clearly defined duty and organizational goals. However, it does not mean that it is not an organization. Though the characteristics are drastically different from the previous organizational settings that Buck had been, it can be classified as a social (or informal) organization.

IV

"Members" are another essential element of organization. Without members, an organization cannot exist. People and dogs are indispensable for the sledding business. The characters of _CW_—particularly the dogs—are organizational beings, but they are different from the managers grimly described in William H. Whyte’s book _The Organization Man_ (1956) in which the organizational members are those who lose individuality in large modern corporations. They also differ from the organizational members in Charlie Chaplin’s _Modern Times_ (1936) in which the members are regarded as a herd of lambs or parts of huge machines. Rather, London’s canine characters are close to the members of late twentieth century American corporations where individuality coexists with organization.2) The characters are not flat and

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2) Joseph Nocera, who wrote the foreword for the newly published version in 2002, asserts that within American business corporations at the turn of the 21st century, “individuality is now a virtue instead of a vice” (Whyte ix).

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dull, but they are alive. This is one of the main strengths of the novel.

Such characterization was less the product of London's creative imagination than a realistic description of the sledding business. In his book *My Dogs in the Northland* (1902), Egerton R. Young, a Canadian missionary to the Hudson Bay Territory, describes the differing “personalities” of each of his dogs, finding distinctions not only between members of different groups (such as the huskies—the indigenous dogs in Alaska—and dogs from other areas of Canada and the United States), but among the huskies themselves: the dishonest and cunning Eskimo dogs, Kooza with strong leadership, indifferent and aloof Voyageur, caring and kind Muff, and Rover, a dog doctor.

These descriptions of dog personalities seem to emphasize the individuality of sledding dogs. This emphasis is retained—or, sometimes, amplified—in *C*W. In fact, many of the dogs in *My Dogs in the Northland* are copied in *C*W with different names.3) Jack became Buck. Kooza is quite similar to Spitz, the previous leader before Buck and his prime antagonist, and Voyageur, the dog with one eye, is recreated as Sol-leks, an old and gloomy dog with one eye. However, in the hand of Jack London, the organizational character has been added to dogs' personalities. In other words, the dogs with strong individuality find their raison d'être within the organization as “members.”

It was inevitable that the clash for leadership should come. Buck wanted it. He wanted it because it was his nature, because he had been gripped tight by that nameless, incomprehensible pride of the trail and trace—that pride which holds dogs in the toil to the last gasp, which lures them to die joyfully in the harness, and breaks their hearts if they are cut out of the harness. (66)

3) Jack London admitted that he had “used” Egerton Young's book for *The Call of the Wild*, particularly for the creation of Buck (Kingman 118).
The “harness” symbolizes the identity as organizational being, and it is the harness that turns individual dogs into parts of the organization in which they cooperate to achieve the organizational goal. They become one in it.

In fact, the characters in *CW* are truly “members.” While they retain their individuality throughout the novel, they also interact and work together to achieve the team’s goal. They are tied together with harnesses that symbolize hierarchy and communication in which each dog work as an organ of a body. This reveals the strong organizational membership of the characters—particularly the dogs—of the sledding teams.

V

The organizational traits of *CW* and its characterization of people and dogs as organizational beings become most apparent in the structured system and hierarchy of the teams for achieving the goals and making the organization operate. The organizations in which Buck is involved—particularly those of sledding—show high levels of systematic structure and clearly defined strong hierarchy.

Sledding—particularly, near the North Pole—is a highly organizational task, and Jack London is realistic in his description of it. Young explains that a typical sledding team has clearly defined roles and a well-structured hierarchy of leadership. A team, according to him, is composed of the two groups: human managers—owner(s) and human subordinates—and dogs. This organization of hierarchy is similar to the newly emerging business corporation model at the turn of the twentieth century. The owner is CEO, the human subordinates are high- and middle-level managers with special skills and knowledge necessary for organizations, and the dogs are workers. For example, within Young’s team, needless to say, Young was the leader of the team. However, most
of the technical decisions were made by the hired professional managers—“Indians.” In most cases, Young ran four sledding teams simultaneously for his mission. For this purpose, four Indians were hired. The most important among them was the guide, the commander-in-chief while the teams were running. About him Young said, “the guide’s position was thus one of great responsibility,” and, as such, he had the greatest power in the organization. Preceding the teams about one or two miles, he directed the teams making paths to the destination. He decided where to stop to take a rest or to set up camps to sleep, and “it was his morning call of ‘Koos-Koos-Kwah!’ (Wake up!) that had to be promptly obeyed by all,” including Young and dogs. His role in the team was critical, and he was paid the most among people and his sleeping place at the camp was right next to the owner (Young 250-51).

The other three humans were all dog-drivers. Whereas the guide was one of the top managers in the organization of four sledding teams, the dog-drivers were middle managers who were in charge of their own departments, in other words, teams of dogs. When he hired them, Young made sure that he selected the right people “who had not only splendid powers of endurance but intelligent sympathy in their management of the dog-trains committed to their care” (252).

London’s sledding teams in CW differ from those of Young’s. They do not have a guide, nor is there a clear distinction between the owner and the employed people. It may be because the objectives of the sledding are different, or because of different customs between two regions. Even with the differences, the first two teams are relatively well organized with distinct role definitions—or division of labor among men—in it.

It was a monotonous life, operating with machine-like regularity. One day was very like another. At a certain time
each morning the cooks turned out, fires were built, and breakfast was eaten. Then, while some broke camp, others harnessed the dogs, and they were under way an hour or so before the darkness fell which gave warning of dawn. At night, camp was made. Some pitched the flies, others cut firewood and pine boughs for the beds, and still others carried water or ice for the cooks. Also, the dogs were fed. (91)

However, the leadership hierarchy is not clear among the people. It is hard to tell who the leader is between François and Perrault, who led the first sledding team. It becomes harder to tell among the people of the second team. “A Scotch half-breed” and his mates are even anonymous (90). They lead the team but they mainly remain in the background. It does not mean, however, that the men in two teams did not have a hierarchy. They did have it, but their hierarchy seems to be different from the strong vertical hierarchy that Young’s team had. Their leadership seems to be a group leadership in which the decision power is shared or, sometimes, divided among them according to tasks. Even though their hierarchy was not prominent in the novel, the team leadership was effective. After all, they were all experts in sledding. They knew how to do it. In the end, they achieved their goals.

The result is quite different when it comes to the third sledding team, which was led by Hal and Charles—with Mercedes, Charles’s wife and Hal’s sister—who were gold seekers. They are comical characters who are unfit for the harsh primitive business environment of the Klondike. They are the embodiment of amateurism in the novel. They did not have proper knowledge and experience for the business into which they were jumping. Their amateurism left them in the midst of confusion of roles. Worst of all, in their team, critical organizational elements are weakened—hierarchy of leadership and clearly define roles. They have neither the strong one-man leadership of Young’s team nor
the well-organized team leadership of the other sledding teams. Disputes over making decisions occur constantly, which denotes the lack of hierarchy and leadership. They simply do not know what to do. The inevitable result of such mismanagement is the total destruction of the organization—drowning the whole team to death.

The other two organizations to which Buck belonged show different traits of organizational hierarchy of leadership and roles. In the “educational” organization of the man in the red sweater, in which Buck began his organizational life by learning the power of the club, which symbolizes strong organizational hierarchy, leadership is powerful—even to the level of cruelty, and the roles of the trainer as leader and the trainees as subordinates are clearly defined. There Buck learned the hierarchy by heart and was transformed into an organizational being who knows his place.

Buck’s relationship with Thornton, however, contrasts drastically with that with the man with a club. Their relationship is based on friendship and love. There is neither trace of cruelty nor business interest between them. However, it does not mean that their relationship lacks hierarchy and division of labor. A different atmosphere within the organization mainly comes from the different leadership style of Thornton, not from the strength of hierarchical order or clarity of division of labor. To Buck, Thornton is his beloved and leader. He voluntarily submits to Thornton and works for him. As London puts it, “Buck’s love was expressed in adoration” for his leader (138).

In spite of the love relationship between Thornton and Buck, and Buck’s voluntary submission to Thornton, love was not the only factor that defined their relationship. Consciously or sub-consciously, Buck’s fear of the human being, ingrained by the club of the man in the red sweater, persisted even in the relationship with Thornton, though the fear did not manifest in the novel. Even Thornton’s love of Buck did not
render meaningless the gulf between man and dog—the powerful power structure in which dog must be always obedient to man, even to his death. When Hal got furious and beat him soundly with a club because Buck did not move in spite of his command to move, Buck did not even think of rebellion—attacking Hal with his fang. Of course, it is partly because he is exhausted, but his endurance of the cruelty is from the educated conception of hierarchy between the human being and dog. That hierarchy is the basis on which the relationship between Thornton and Buck is founded. Thornton is always leader and manager, and Buck his subordinate.

Whereas the human being occupies the higher end of the organization, dogs are located in the lower level of the sledding hierarchy; men are managers, and dogs are laborers. The gulf between men and dogs in the organizational hierarchy, however, is similar to that between native white male managers and the working class—especially, African Americans and women workers—at the turn of the twentieth century. Once you are born a dog, then your place is automatically limited to the manual worker fastened to a harness. Dogs were not only innate subordinates to the human being. Indispensable as they were for travel around Alaska, they were mainly regarded as disposable and interchangeable parts of an organization like the human workers at the turn of the century: “The worthless [dogs] were to be got rid of, and, since dogs count for little against dollars, they were to be sold” (105).

Dogs’ despicable status does not mean, however, that they did not have a hierarchy within themselves, or that their hierarchy was unimportant in the novel. Rather, London’s focus of description is more on dogs’ hierarchy within their organizations and the advancement of the protagonist up through the hierarchy than on those of men. In the simplest terms, *CW* is a story of a dog who is thrown forcefully into the lowest level of hierarchy, fights to rise up to the top of the organizational

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hierarchy of dogs and eventually forms his own independent organization in which he becomes the leader of all members.

According to a dog sledding manual published by Noel Flanders in 1989, the sledding dogs’ roles within a team are highly specialized and have clearly defined tasks and hierarchy among the roles. Figure 1 shows the form of the most common modern racing dogs sled team—eight dogs in a double file format. Here, the team is divided into four groups: lead dog(s), point/swing dogs, team dogs, and wheel-dogs. Among them, the lead dog is the most important in a sledding team when the team is running because it controls the movement of other dogs. Flanders explains that, in a modern sledding system, there is no rein that runs between people and dogs while dogs are interconnected by a line called “gangline,” which “runs between the dogs and the object in tow. This rope is connected to each dog by one small rope connecting the collar and one connecting the harness” (Flanders 26).  

This means that, while running, the dogs’ movements are influenced by other dogs—mostly by the lead dog—rather than by people in the team. People do control the whole team of dogs by giving verbal commands—mostly several short words—to the lead dog, but in most cases, the dogs are given a great amount of autonomy, and the lead dog assumes leadership in the team. Sometimes even human leaders must follow the direction of the lead dog. Not all dogs, according to Flanders, can become a lead dog. A lead dog is born and has to undergo much

4) Though Flanders explains the late twentieth century sledding system, London’s dog system appears to be quite similar one, for there is no mention of rein in the novel.

5) Egerton R. Young wrote about the case when he and all the other members—people and dogs altogether—had to depend on Jack, the lead dog and the model of Buck in The Call of the Wild, in severe blizzard which left people and the other dogs senseless about direction. In this case, the lead dog took the absolute leadership in the team. See Young, chapter 6.
training. She says even in the late twentieth century, good lead dogs are quite rare, and, as such, they are many times more expensive than normal sledding dogs (64).

At the forefront of the train of sledding dogs, the lead dog runs. Behind it, runs “point dog” or “swing dog.” This dog ranks the second in the team. His function is working as a bridge between the lead dog and the team dog that comes next to it. It is usually the fastest dog—quick at making turns or stops—that can respond to the lead of the lead dog in front of it. It is this dog that replaces the lead dog when it cannot lead the team because it gets hurt or tired (Flanders 67).

![Typical sledding team arrangement](image)

Figure 1. Typical sledding team arrangement (Used with permission from *The Joy of Running Sled Dogs* by Noel Flanders (Alpine Publications, 1987), p. 27).

The last in the train, in other words, the one that is closest to the sled, is the position for “wheeler” or, sometimes called “sled dog” or “steer-dog.” An adventurer once explained the position that “[the] best dog generally being placed in front, as ‘foregoer,’ the next best in rear as ‘steer-dog.’ It is the business of the foregoer to keep the track, however faint it may be, on lake or river. The steer dog guides the sled, and prevents it from striking or catching in tree or root” (Butler 82). Generally, the strongest dog—relatively slow in speed—is fit for the position.

Between the lead dog and the wheeler are team dogs. They are the engine of the team. The main function of the team dogs is to provide the power to pull the sled. They are merely “hands” of the organization.
who add their labor to the organizational effort to achieve goals.

Jack London successfully describes the hierarchy and roles not only within the whole sledding team but also within the dogs which is quite similar to the structure of modern sledding teams. In fact, each dog of London’s sledding teams in *CW* has a clearly defined role. One of the dogs holds leadership, and the lead dog literally leads—as a human foreman does for his fellow workers—the whole team of dogs. When Buck joined the first sledding team, Spitz was the lead dog, and as the lead dog, he led the team and let other members know their places. “Spitz was the leader, likewise experienced, and while he could not always get at Buck, he growled sharp reproof now and again, or cunningly threw his weight in the traces to jerk Buck into the way he should go” (36). All other dogs were supposed to follow the lead dog.

London does not fail to show, however, that, even among the subordinate dogs, there was a certain level of hierarchy and defined role among the positions. When Buck first joined the sledding team as a new hand, he was put intentionally in a certain position where, between two experienced sled dogs, he could be trained into teamwork.

Buck had been purposely placed between Dave and Sol-leks so that he might receive instruction. Apt scholar that he was, they were equally apt teachers, never allowing him to linger long in error, and enforcing their teaching with their sharp teeth. Dave was fair and very wise. He never nipped Buck without cause, and he never failed to nip him when he stood in need of it. As François’s whip backed him up, Buck found it to be cheaper to mend his ways than to retaliate. (43-44)

With systematic orientation and training by the team, Buck successfully adapted to the new environment and role, and eventually grew to become the leader in his organization.

In sum, the sledding teams in *CW* had a clearly structured
organizational hierarchy with clearly defined roles in it. It is also true of the organization in which the man in the red sweater trained dogs. As an educational institution with clear hierarchical distinction between trainer (the man in the red sweater) and trainees (dogs), it had a well-structured hierarchy, and roles within it were obvious. Such organizations can be safely classified as formal organizations. On the other hand, the organization of Thornton is closer to a family in which the organizational goals are not clear. In that sense, it can be regarded as one of those social organizations which generally have strong hierarchy and well-defined roles without strong and shared formal goals.

VI

The fourth element of organization is communication. Generally called by organizational communication scholars “the lifeblood of the organization,” “the glue that binds the organization,” “the oil that smooths the organization’s functions,” and the “binding agent that cements all relationships,” communication is thought to be essential to an organization (Goldhaber 56). Chester I. Barnard emphasized that, in order to maintain an organization in operation, the managers have to maintain “a system of cooperative effort.” Three functions are essential for that, one of which is “to provide the system of communication” (217).

Then, how does Jack London describe it in COW? Gerald M. Goldhaber asserts that organizational communication becomes important

6) In organizational studies, communication itself is an independent field of study with wide range of scholarship. Therefore, any attempt to explain what it is in a few sentences is subject to severe criticism. But here I present the most simplified version of its definition. Because it is not my intention to explain the concept of organizational communication, I think the brief explanation works for the purpose of the paper.

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mainly within a "complex" organization (17). Yet, describing various relationships in the novel in terms of organization, London clearly emphasized the importance of communication among people, among dogs, and between men and dogs though the organizations were not so complex. The inevitable reason for the emphasis can be explained with the definition of organizational communication presented by Goldhaber himself. His definition underscores two factors of organizational communication which distinguishes itself from general communication: "within a network of interdependent relationships" and "to cope with environmental uncertainty" (28). From this, we can see that the importance of organizational communication increases proportionally not only to the organizational complexity but also to the degree of environmental uncertainty. Therefore, even when the size of an organization is small, communication among its members still becomes more important when the organization faces greater environmental obstacles for them to achieve organizational goals.

Among the two factors, the first one is closely related to two elements already discussed—members and structured system hierarchy. In other words, organizational communication is a communication among the members that belong to a clearly defined system of hierarchy with roles in which they are dependent on one another. In CW, the first factor does not play an important role in communication because the size of the organizations in the novel are all small.

The second factor is closely related to organizational goals or objectives. In this perspective, communication is "the process of creating and exchanging messages" (Goldhaber 28) the purpose of which is to facilitate the achievement of organizational goals or objectives in the face of hostile or tough environments that make an organization hard to function correctly. It is this second feature of communication that is conspicuous in the description of the organizations of CW, including
those of sledding teams.

The Yukon Territory, the area that Buck and his organizations worked, can be characterized as subject to the severity of nature. What the fortune seekers who landed on the coasts of the Yukon Territory between 1897 and 1899 to join “the Klondike Fever” (Berton) had to face was the notoriously hostile nature that was repellent to those who wanted to approach the interior parts of the region. The frightening Chilkoot Pass trail was “a mountain trail so steep that in places it was almost vertical”, but was the most popular way of all the possible routes to the interior lands. The Pass, which forced Captain Shepard—London’s brother-in-law, partner of the adventure, and his financial sponsor—to give up the adventure, was just the beginning of a series of tribulations that they would face in the future (Easby-Smith 227-34).7 In this environment, many of the gold prospectors lost their lives or damaged their health with hunger or accidents. To them, therefore, survival became an important goal of the adventure.

To London, the severe environment of Alaska was—as he named the title of the first chapter of CW “Into the Primitive”—the embodiment of “primitiveness.”8 It was the place where the severe nature, along with

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7) Also see Jack London, “The Economics of the Klondike” 70-4. About the Captain Shepard, see C. London 225-226. The quote is from Kershaw 59. As for the Chilkoot trail, see Neufeld and Norris.
8) In his short fiction “Which Make Men Remember,” London describes it vividly
the insatiable greed of the human being, turned everyone into a primitive being. The people from the civilized world shed their civility and became cruel beasts. That was where Buck was plunged from the “sun-kissed” Santa Clara Valley where almost everything was within expectation and under control: “Buck’s first day on the Dyea beach was like a nightmare. Every hour was filled with shock and surprise. … Here was neither peace, nor rest, nor a moment’s safety. All was confusion and action, and every moment life and limb were in peril” (33).

The new environment required constant alertness because it was full of unexpected dangers. The “law of club and fang” was the law of the jungle. Without alertness, anyone could be hurt or put to death by the club and fang of others or of nature—biting cold, blizzard, the Indians (the Yeehats), wolves, rivers covered with thin ice, and hunger which was inevitable due to the scarcity of vegetables and animals in the region. Buck as an individual suffered the former, but his groups, the latter. It was the severity and uncertainty of nature that his organizations had to overcome, and effective communication among members was crucial.

In the severe and risky environment, communication within the organization is vital. Without it, the whole team may be the victim of nature’s fang. As such, the importance of communication among team members—people and dogs altogether—is highly prominent in the novel.

For example, the destruction of Hal and Charles’s team in the river resulted mainly from the lack of communication, or, more precisely, the lack of systematic and efficient communication in an organization without clearly defined hierarchy and roles among the human managers. The result was aggressive words and unending dispute among them:

(Jack London The God of His Fathers, and Other Stories 79-80).

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Charles and Hal wrangled whenever Mercedes gave them a chance. It was the cherished belief of each that he did more than his share of the work, and neither forbore to speak this belief at every opportunity. Some times Mercedes sided with her husband, some times with her brother. The result was a beautiful and unending family quarrel. … In the meantime the fire remained unbuilt, the camp half pitched, and the dogs unled. [Emphasis added] (119-120)

Their abundant exchange of words, in fact, was not “communication” in organizational sense, for it did not contribute to the achievement of the team’s goal.

Ironically, real informative and contributing communication was impossible in this group. Whenever someone attempted to communicate something vital, it was lost. For example, on arriving near the White River, Hal was told by John Thornton that crossing the river was quite risky. Hal simply ignored the ominous warning, and commanded the dogs, “Get up there, Buck! Hi! Get up there! Mush on!” (127) But the dogs would not stir at all. In fact, they could not. They were exhausted by now from the serious exploitation of the previous and current owners—particularly by the hopelessly incompetent management of Hal and Charles. Therefore, even though they wanted, all the dogs were unable to obey the command. London implies, however, that the exhaustion was not the only—or even main—reason for the disobedience. While the other dogs made effort, though involuntarily—to move, Buck did not move at all: “Buck made no effort. He lay quietly where he had fallen. The lash bit into him again and again, but he neither whined nor struggled” (128). And London did not fail to comment: “This was the first time Buck had failed.” Buck who had surprised experienced dog-drivers with his power, intelligence, and leadership, “failed” to obey his master’s command!

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Here readers can easily understand that Buck was communicating a nonverbal message to the owners. He was not unable to move, but, as London himself emphasized, “He refused to stir” (129). His excellent instinct let him know that Thornton was right. He wanted to communicate that he would be beaten to death rather than cross the fragile ice on the river, but Hal had no ear to get this message, which drove the team into destruction.

Contrary to Hal, Thornton understood Buck. He knew what Buck was trying to say. After the hideous scream of Hal and his team, Thornton and Buck began their relationship with effective communication based on deep mutual understanding and love: “John Thornton and Buck looked at each other. ‘You poor devil,’ said John Thornton, and Buck licked his hand” (132).

The personal and effective communication implies that they would successfully overcome the environmental uncertainty and severity if only they were together. London extended a great deal of energy in describing the verbal and nonverbal communication between the two. Truly, with this powerful tool, they did make a successful adventure. It was when the communication between the two was disconnected that Thornton failed to overcome the attack of nature—the Indians—and was killed.

VII

We have seen that in *CW* we can find four critical elements—clearly defined goals, members, a structured system hierarchy, and organizational communication—of organization, and that these elements play a major role in the novel’s narrative structure and dominant themes. This fact strongly suggests that the “dog story,” as its author used to call it, is in fact a story of organization. The organizational
character of the novel stands out when it is compared with other novels of his, particularly *White Fang*. In a letter, London emphasizes that the new novel is not a sequel but a companion piece (Labor, Leitz and Shepard 454-55). He wants to create exactly the same tone of novel with *CW* except by using the opposite process. However, from the organizational perspective, it is a totally different story. There are few organizational elements. White Fang is an individualistic hero. He is the survivor in a cruel and harsh environment—crueler and harsher than that of *CW*. He overcomes it with his cunning, power, and the help of men, but not with the help of other dogs and men as a team. His character in essence is well described in a sentence from the last part of the novel: “All [White Fang] asked of other dogs was to be let alone. His whole life he had kept aloof from his kind, and he still desired to keep aloof” (Jack London *White Fang* 289). This is an absolute contrast with Buck who always worked with his kind and with men in various organizations. With less organizational features, but with more cruelty and individualism, it fails to be the true companion of *CW*. It is more like “Diable—A Dog” with a happy ending.

This way of reading sheds new light on the interpretation of the novel—reading it through the glass of organizational theories, which let readers see that the novel excellently describes the birth of a great organizational leader who is born a leader and who trains hard to be so. Viewed from that perspective, the novel is another version of the rags-to-riches story within a new environment—business organizations. Considering that Horatio Alger style stories were extremely popular in the second half of the nineteenth century, the great success of *CW* is not surprising at all. And contemporary readers, consciously or unconsciously, may have viewed the novel as a success story in a business environment, which in turn would have contributed to the great popularity of the novel. As already mentioned, in order to support

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this theory, further research on the reception of the novel by contemporary readers is necessary, but what has already been demonstrated offers strong support for the theory.

Works Cited


Abstract

This paper examines Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild* (1903) from an organization perspective. The novel has long been read as a Naturalistic work with primitiveness and virility at its core. However, this study focuses on London’s presentation of the environment of dog-sledding in the Klondike, into which the dog Buck, his main character, is thrown, as not only primitive but also distinguished by complex organizational characteristics.

It interprets the novel using four essential elements of organization: clear goal, members, structured system hierarchy (clearly defined role and leadership), and communication. It argues that all the essential elements of organization are the backbone of the plot of the story. This organizational interpretation opens the possibility of the novel as a business fiction. It provides a clue to the unprecedented popularity of the fiction among the Americans who were experiencing the rise of big business which had managers and organization at its core.

Key Words: Jack London, Organizational Fiction, Organization, Naturalism, *The Call of the Wild*