



# The Call of the Wild Study Guide

by Lisa Tiffin

For the novel by  
Jack London

**CD Version**

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Progeny Press

## *The Call of the Wild Study Guide*

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**The Call of the Wild Study Guide**  
A Progeny Press Study Guide  
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## Synopsis

Set during the Klondike Gold Rush (1897–98), *The Call of the Wild* follows the life of Buck, a kidnapped dog who is forced to become a sled dog in the frozen lands of Canada's Yukon Territory. Buck must learn the ways of both the miners and the other sled dogs if he is to survive. As Buck conquers his fears and learns the "law of club and fang," he begins to rise against his adversaries. Buck eventually comes to accept his fate and, after a hard life, finds acceptance and love with his final master. In the end, however, Buck answers the call of the wild.

Through Buck's adventures, readers are given insight into the rigors of the north and the struggles of people in search of gold and the possibility of a better life. *The Call of the Wild* provides a fascinating glimpse into both history and the heart of man and beast.

## Chapter 2

### Vocabulary:

#### *Part One:*

Many words we use are actually word combinations from other languages. For instance, the word *combine* comes from Latin *com* (together) + *bini* (two together) or “two by two”; so *combine* means joining several things together. Using the word segments in the table below, determine the meanings of the following words. Use a dictionary to confirm your definition.

#### *Word Segments*

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carn: flesh	ord/order: order, rank, class
con-: with; together	pense: hang, weigh, think
dis-/di-: apart, away	prim-/prime-/primo-: first, chief, foremost
ev-: time, eternity	retro-: back, backwards
gress: step	sola/sol: comfort
in-: on, into, not	spect-/spic-: to look at
intro-: in, into	

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1. primordial:
2. introspective:
3. incarnation:
4. disconsolate:
5. retrogression:

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6. conspicuous:

7. primeval:

### *Part Two:*

For each of the words below, write the definition and use the word in a sentence of your own.

1. vicarious

*Definition:*

*Sentence:*

2. bristling

*Definition:*

*Sentence:*

3. belligerent

*Definition:*

*Sentence:*

4. arduous

*Definition:*

*Sentence:*

5. unduly

*Definition:*

*Sentence:*

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6. fastidiousness

*Definition:*

*Sentence:*

7. clamor

*Definition:*

*Sentence:*

8. peril

*Definition:*

*Sentence:*

### **Questions:**

1. How does Curly's death teach Buck about the law of club and fang?
2. Describe Buck's two reactions to Curly's death.
3. How does Buck learn to pull the sled?
4. Why can't Spitz discipline Joe?

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5. Both Dave and Sol-leks seem indifferent to the other dogs. Describe the transformation of their personalities when they pull the sled.
6. Explain why this personality change is important to the story.
7. List four characteristics Buck acquires as he transforms into a more primitive sled dog.

### **Analysis:**

8. *Setting* refers to the time, place, and environment in which a story takes place. Describe the setting of the opening of Chapter 2.
9. Why does London describe Buck's fear of being trapped when he awakens in his snow nest as a "token that he [Buck] was harking back through his own life to the lives of his forebears?"
10. London focuses on Buck's education in the ways of the frozen north, from his learning the primitive laws to finding a place to sleep. Even Perrault "prided himself on his knowledge . . . which. . . was indispensable." Why is knowledge so important?
11. *Hyperbole* (hi-PER-bo-lee) is a literary term for dramatic exaggeration to emphasize, shock, or amuse. For example, "Randall was so skinny, when he stuck out his tongue he looked like a zipper" is hyperbole to amuse. On the other hand, "When Henrietta realized she had slept through her



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8:00 a.m. biology exam, her head exploded,” is hyperbole for shock or emphasis. Find one instance of hyperbole in the first paragraph of Chapter 2, and explain why the statement is hyperbole.

12. In the last paragraph of Chapter 2, London says of the changes in Buck, “Thus, as token of what a puppet thing life is, the ancient song surged through him and he came into his own again.” What does London mean by the phrase “a puppet thing”? Look up the term *determinism*. Based on London’s language in this paragraph, do you think his statements are deterministic?
  
13. By calling Buck’s former life a “puppet thing,” London suggests that perhaps his former life was not real living, but the harshness of his new life allows him to truly live. Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer.

### **Dig Deeper:**

Toward the end of Chapter 2, London makes some statements about Buck and about changes in his value system as he struggles to adapt to his new situations and environment. Consider the following passages:

This first theft marked Buck as fit to survive in the hostile Northland environment. It marked his adaptability, his capacity to adjust himself to changing conditions, the lack of which would have meant swift and terrible death. It marked further decay or going to pieces of his moral nature, a vain thing and a handicap in the ruthless struggle for existence. It was all well enough in the Southland, under the law of love and fellowship, to respect private property and personal feelings; but in the Northland, under the law of club and fang, who so took such things into account was a fool, and in so far as he observed them he would fail to prosper.

. . . the completeness of his decivilization was not evidenced by his ability to flee from the defence of a moral consideration and so save his hide. . . . In short, the things he did were done because it was easier to do them than not to do them.

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14. According to London, how does Buck's theft of food enable him to adapt to the ways of the North?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
15. Why does London say that Buck's moral nature was "a vain thing and a handicap"?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
16. Look up the terms *moral relativism*, *pragmatism*, and *moral absolutism*. According to the definitions you find, which term best describes what London is describing in the quotations above?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
17. Read Exodus 20:1–17 and Mark 12:28–34. Referring back to the definitions you found of moral relativism, pragmatism, and moral absolutism, which term best describes the statements in these scriptures?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
18. In the large quotation above from the book, London writes that whoever followed "the law of love and fellowship . . . private property and personal feelings . . . was a fool, and in so far as he observed them he would fail to prosper." We remember that in the context of the book London is talking about a dog, but do people have such beliefs about their own lives and situations? Must one cheat in school to get good grades? Do business people have to cheat customers or employees to keep ahead and compete? Do we have to hedge the truth, bend the rules, to succeed?

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19. Read Genesis 39; Daniel 3:1–30; Daniel 6; Acts 3:1–10 and 4:1–21. Next to the names of the people below, write what hardship or threat they faced and how they responded.

	<u>Threat/Hardship</u>	<u>Response</u>
Joseph:		
Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego:		
Daniel:		
Peter & John:		

20. London also says that anyone who does not discard his moral nature “would fail to prosper.” Review the situations of the men in the previous question. Is it true that holding to the truth caused them to fail to prosper? Is prospering more important than being right and having a clear conscience? Read Matthew 6:19–21, 25–34. What does this passage say about worrying about prospering and our priorities?

**Optional Activities:**

1. As London describes Buck’s and the other dogs’ actions, he uses words that imply the animals are choosing based on a moral system. He refers to Spitz “laughing” at the death of Curly and Buck “hating” him because of it. Dave is “fair and very wise”; Pike and Buck “steal” bacon. Have a class discussion about whether animals have a sense of morality. Are their actions based on “good” or “bad,” or are they based on punishment and reward, or making their owner or the person in power happy, or at least not annoyed. Do they simply try to do the thing that is easiest and causes the least disruption in their lives, or do they try to do the “right” thing?
2. London says that the theft of the bacon “marked Buck as fit to survive in the hostile Northland environment.” Conduct an experiment in the home about whether pets will steal food even in “civilized” situations—or “under the law of love and fellowship,” as London calls it. First, set up

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a hypothesis about whether an animal will take food that does not belong to it if the opportunity arises. Then design an experiment to test the hypothesis—for instance, put a piece of bacon on a counter before the family leaves for a period of time, then see if the animal takes the bacon while the family is away. You might vary the conditions of the experiment to see whether different variables change the outcome. For example, does it make a difference if the bacon is on the counter, the table, a chair, or the floor? What if you vary the amount of time away? Do different foods have a different result? Keep detailed accounts of the conditions and results of each experiment, then, based on the results, write your conclusions about your hypothesis and what the results imply about the animal's sense of morality. Create an oral presentation to give to your family or class, explaining your hypothesis, experiment(s), and findings.

3. Think about the people you look up to and respect, both the people around you and people in history. Are they people who discarded their moral nature, or are they people who stood for what is right? Choose someone you particularly admire and write a short paper describing the reasons you admire him or her. As an alternative, write a short opinion piece about the things you want to hold to and stand for as you become an adult. Your opinion piece might be an essay, a poem, or a presentation in front of your family or classroom. You also might write a letter to the person you admire, explaining why you admire him or her and, if they are living, send the letter to them.
4. Sometimes when a writer or orator makes a statement in support of a position, the statement or the facts used border on the ludicrous or absurd, but because it is in the midst of other information, the absurdity can be missed. For example, in the midst of the discussion of Buck's transformation from a civilized dog to uncivilized, London says this:

Civilized, he could have died for a moral consideration, say the defence of Judge Miller's riding-whip; but the completeness of his decivilization was not evidenced by his ability to flee from the defence of a moral consideration and so save his hide. . . . the things he did were done because it was easier to do them than not to do them.

London seeks to gain the reader's sympathy for Buck's decivilization, so he tries to make the choices Buck may have made in his previous life seem silly—"say the defence of Judge Miller's riding-whip." Everyone would agree that it would be silly to die to save a riding-whip, but that is not truly representative of a moral consideration. A more representative moral consideration would be to give his life defending one of the children or the home. By using what in reality is a silly proposition, London appears to be trying to make any position other than his own seem silly by association.

As a group, discuss this argument technique and how it might be used to skew discussions. Discuss whether it is fair and honest to use this technique in arguing or discussion. As an alternative, look through newspaper and magazine articles and opinion pieces and find five examples of this technique.

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18. Answers may vary. Buck's actions disrupt everything about the team and their job. Buck always appears blameless, but he gets other dogs in trouble, and he often thwarts justice so that other guilty dogs get away with their actions: "a general insubordination sprang up"; "the rest of the team went from bad to worse"; "Buck had destroyed the solidarity of the team"; "The breaking down of discipline likewise affected the dogs in their relations with each other." Buck's actions are not fair to the team and the men.

19. Answers may vary. Each passage looks at the same thing from a slightly different angle. Jesus says in the Matthew passage that we are to be "as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves." We should be smart about the way the world does things (shrewd), but we are not to do them that way (innocent). Romans says we should be "wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil." Wisdom combines knowledge, understanding, and action; implying again that we should clearly understand the workings of the world, but we are to be innocent of doing evil. The Luke passage is a little more complex. Jesus uses an example of a manager who mismanages his master's money, but then shrewdly gains favor with his master's debtors so they will act kindly toward him when he loses his job. Jesus then tells us that we should use our worldly wealth to gain friends for ourselves. But we must pay close attention to what follows, because Jesus then talks about being honest and trustworthy with our resources, and he reminds us that we must remember to worship God, not money. In these verses, Jesus is telling us that just as the dishonest manager understood what would gain favor with his master's debtors, we should know what gains favor with people of the world, but we should do so only in an honest and trustworthy way. He is very clear about this in verses 11 through 13. All of the passages are clear that we must know the workings of the world, but remain innocent in our actions. In other words, we are not to be naive. We should always be smart about the way we do things, we should not be taken by surprise. Buck, on the other hand, purposefully uses the ways of the world in his quest for leadership of the dog team. He is sneaky, disruptive, and dishonest, and his actions hurt the entire team. The wisdom of the scriptures above tells us that we should understand such tactics, but never use them ourselves. One benefit of such knowledge is that it enables us to better defend ourselves against such actions.

20. a. God commands that we should not think of ourselves as better than other people; rather, we should think of and assess ourselves truthfully and honestly as God has given us gifts. We are to recognize that God has enabled each of us to do separate jobs, so we can work together effectively. b. God expects us to love each other and give honor to other people. We are to have sympathy for each other, be hospitable and giving, and be agreeable, not argumentative. c. He tells us that we are to forgive our enemies, not repay them with evil. We are to do all we can to live peaceably with all people and overcome evil with good. d. In this chapter, Buck's actions do not fit at all with Romans 12. In fact, his actions are very nearly opposite the instructions in this passage.

### *Chapter 4*

#### *Vocabulary:*

##### *Part One:*

1. swiftness, speed; 2. inundated; 3. boring, tedious, dull, lacking in variety; 4. everlasting, continuous; 5. flounder: to struggle clumsily; lugubriously: in an exaggerated mournful or sad way; 6. compelling, irresistible.

##### *Part Two:*

1. stubbornly resistant; 2. declined, expired; 3. ability to recover; 4. shining; 5. gloomy; 6. bewildered, puzzled; 7. longing for.

##### *Questions:*

1. François harnesses Sol-leks as the lead dog because he does not notice Buck there, and he feels that Sol-leks is the best lead dog he had left.

2. When François harnesses Sol-leks in the lead dog spot, Buck pounces on Sol-leks and drives him back.

3. Buck refuses to be harnessed into his old position and instead runs around dodging the clubs and drivers for an hour. Eventually François and Perrault give up and make him the lead.

4. Buck is a better lead dog even than Spitz in judgment and quick thinking and is excellent at restoring and keeping order.

5. The tone of the team picks up; the dogs pull as one dog; they help Perrault beat his time record.

6. François and Perrault receive new orders and leave the team, and Buck never sees them again. A Scottish man takes over the team, and they now pull heavy mail loads, which Buck does not like. Buck is not personally very affected by François and Perrault leaving his life; they are just two more humans who are gone.

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### *Dialect:*

7. a. “Eh? What did I say? I spoke the truth when I said that Buck was like two devils.” b. “Look at that Buck. He killed Spitz and now he thinks he should take the job.”

8. Answers will vary but should contain elements of the following: The dialect reminds the reader of where the action is taking place (Canadian arctic), and it helps tell more about the type of men François and Perrault are. It makes the story seem more real because they speak with presumably accurate accents and colorful phrases rather than American English.

### *Analysis:*

9. Buck feels being lead dog is his right because he earned it by defeating and killing Spitz.

10. The mail run is boring and heavy work, while the run with Perrault and François was fast and challenging. Buck seems to like tests and challenges and to feel proud of his accomplishments.

11. The drivers attend to the dogs first because the dogs are their lifeline in the arctic. Without healthy and strong dogs, the drivers would not make it to their destinations and possibly not even survive.

12. Buck dreams of a hairy man with long arms, short legs, and a hunched-over walk. The man holds a club and seems afraid of what is out in the darkness, huddling and sleeping near a fire. *Instinct* refers to behaviors that seem to be inbred, things animals do automatically, like building nests or hunting. What Buck experiences would be better described as a primal memory, something that is supposedly a “memory” from his long-dead ancestors.

13. Dave is proud of the work he does on the trail, and he cannot bear to see another dog do his work.

14. They feel that since he is going to die anyway, it is merciful to let him die content in his work, feeling satisfaction and pride in never giving up.

15. Dave can no longer move and he is suffering, so the Scottish man shoots Dave to be merciful and end his suffering.

### *Dig Deeper:*

16. Evolution is the theory that life forms evolved over time from simple organisms to more sophisticated and complex life forms. “Survival of the fittest” refers to the concept that the strongest and most suitable of a species survives and procreates, passing on the best of that species’ characteristics. Students may note the difference between microevolution, which is the changes within a species over time; and macroevolution, which is the supposed changes that occur over time that create new species from old. For example, microevolution describes a disease organism mutating to become resistant to penicillin. Macroevolution describes the theory that all primates evolved from a common ancestor.

17. Genesis says that God created each individual type of life and that each procreates after its own kind. The specific phrase that would contradict Darwin’s theory is “according to their kinds” or “each according to its kind.” This phrase seems to clearly state that God directly created each form of life and made the plants and animals to reproduce along specific lines, not to branch out into more species.

18. Jesus told his followers to not look for revenge or to struggle for superiority with someone who attacks in various ways (much as Buck avoided confrontation with Spitz in earlier chapters)—we are to accommodate people, love our enemies. He also said that to be great one must become a servant to others, just as Jesus did on earth and in his death. Paul also reminds us to respect those who lead and serve us and to not pay back wrong for wrong but to be kind. These principles seem to be directly opposite to what London portrays in Buck’s animal world, or at least to the way Buck functions in that world.

19. Answers will vary. London seems to be deliberately vague in this last statement, so we cannot state with certainty what he is implying. It may be that he is inserting an element of fear for the dogs, hearkening back to the fear faced by the ancestral man in Buck’s dreams, but this time the fear is of the man, not what lies beyond. He may be simply implying that instead of the affection that Perrault and François had for the dogs, these men view them only as parts of the machinery necessary for the job. Accept reasonable answers.

## *Chapter 5*

### *Vocabulary:*

#### *Part One:*

1. overflow; beyond what is required, extra; 2. prejudice; unfavorable opinions formed before knowledge; 3. to walk all over, to thoroughly cover by walking; 4. without sense or feeling; 5. hanging over, about to happen; 6. disjointed, not connected, or hard to understand; 7. pull together, violent contractions.

#### *Part Two:*

1. e; 2. h; 3. b; 4. j; 5. g; 6. c; 7. i; 8. f; 9. a; 10. d.