

# The Notion of Chance in the Narratives of Jack London and R. L. Stevenson

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UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA  
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**The Notion of Chance in the Narratives of Jack London and  
Robert Louis Stevenson**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Both Jack London and Robert Louis Stevenson are famous for a variety of literary work they produced in a relatively short time span. As we can establish a link between the two vagabond authors who both sought an escape from the routine and the conventions of the societies they only seemingly belonged to, we can also establish a connection between some of their most brilliant works, mainly those characterised by elements of adventure fiction. This paper deals with the most prominent themes and motifs of the authors' literary works, as well as the problems and conflicts which arise from the analysis of their work.

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## INTRODUCTION

Robert Louis Stevenson and Jack London both lived in a time characterised by changes. In a world dominated by new scientific and philosophical ideas – such as those introduced by Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Karl Marx – the idea of the importance of an individual had a fertile soil to grow on and expand, together with the most contradictory idea of the importance of a community. This was truly a time that offered a possibility for everyone to express their attitude towards life and offer their own vision of what the purpose of life could be. Writers such as Stevenson and London nurtured this thought and seasoned it with personal observations and opinions.<sup>1</sup>

R. L. Stevenson lived from 1850 to 1894 and by his distinctive, authentic writing ability he paved the way upon which London proudly strode in years that followed. London, who lived from 1876 to 1916, was greatly influenced by Stevenson's writing: in fact, from his letters to Cloudesley Johns, it is clear that London truly admired Stevenson's dedication and skill as a storyteller.<sup>2</sup>

March 1897 marked a new era of Jack London's life: he headed for Klondike, which would soon become the main source of inspiration for his Alaskan series of novels and stories. This specific work is particular in its way of shaping its characters by rapidly changing the circumstances in which these characters are found. In the summer of 1900 his stories were published in a book under the title *The Son of the Wolf*, which would open a door towards an immense success and growing reputation awaiting this genius writer. Charles Child Walcutt captures London's ability perfectly: "*The best of his stories have extraordinary*

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<sup>1</sup> Walcutt (1966: 7)

<sup>2</sup> London (1988: 52)

*power, which is generated by bold ideas, vigour and concreteness of language, and that combination of mystery and suspense that is the mark of the born storyteller.”*<sup>3</sup>

It is not surprising that a man with a genius mind such as Jack London’s would accept every circumstance, adapt to it, learn from it, and mould it in order to create something which would, in the years to come, grant him the title of one of the most praised authors of fiction. Many scholars may have dismissed Jack London’s importance in the literary history of humankind, but his extraordinariness remained present throughout history. His unambiguous and linear style of writing make his work approachable to vast public; there is no ostentation to encounter nor unimaginable storylines which take one’s attention away from the essence of the message which the author wanted to transmit to the reader. Jack London’s work may seem simple, but it is this very unhindered simplicity what helps London’s truths to resonate so deeply within a reader’s mind, to linger once the reader places a book back on the shelf.

Like London, Robert Louis Stevenson left his mark on various – popular as well as less favoured – themes and genres (an astounding example can be found in Stevenson’s *Weir of Hermiston* which “moves between a novel of disturbing psychological realism and a compendium of ballad-like tales.”<sup>4</sup>). His essays, poems, travel books, and short stories are a monument of rebellion against conventions of his era – though historically belonging to Victorian era, or rather, fin de siècle, Stevenson’s literary style stands out from the rest of typical Gothic fiction: “We typically associate Gothic writing with excess, but Stevenson’s Gothic tales are notable for their restraint.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Stevenson did not write novels in the strict nineteenth-century definition of the word, but nestled in the realm of adventure narrative, as well as the urban Gothic. Ian Duncan points out that “we should understand Stevenson’s works of fiction, then, in terms of a series of choices and experiments which

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<sup>3</sup> Walcutt (1966: 16)

<sup>4</sup> Fielding (2010: 5)

<sup>5</sup> Fielding (2010: 53)

*involved a critical refusal of the Victorian novel and its protocols, rather than a failure to master them [...]*”<sup>6</sup>

Stevenson’s style is often described as transparent, in contrast with the overly kitsch literary methods of fin de siècle. However, a trait he shares with his contemporaries is the sombre, sullen description characteristic for Gothic fiction. *Transparent* should not be mistaken for overly simple: his sentences flow in unison carrying a heavy weight of Stevenson’s ideas, beliefs, and desires.

As the American North was the source of inspiration for Jack London, so was the Pacific the inexhaustible source of Stevenson’s creation. Both authors are fascinated by these particular landscapes which they have experienced first-hand. These places are homes to certain native peoples whose customs and conduct is often described as primitive. Obviously, both authors were greatly fascinated by the time spent in the vicinity of these people: in them, they both probably saw themselves as they would be had the chance introduced different circumstances in their class-oriented and morally constrained, ‘civilised’ world.

Stevenson is nowadays known mainly for his adventure narrative, which is almost an autobiographical retelling of the writer’s numerous voyages, often employing a first person narrative in order to portrait himself as the survivor, spiritually more progressive as the voyage gradually introduces new experience<sup>7</sup>, since, according to Stevenson, “*The landscape may shift around us travellers, but it is we who change.*”<sup>8</sup> He considered life a voyage, a journey on which one does not become familiar merely with his surroundings, but also with himself, with his beliefs as well as his past.

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<sup>6</sup> Fielding (2010: 15)

<sup>7</sup> Fielding (2010: 91)

<sup>8</sup> Fielding (2010: 93)

## 1. ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON'S AND JACK LONDON'S LITERARY WORK

Jack London left his mark on various literary genres: he published jokes, essays, short stories, novels, poems, and articles, demonstrating his amazing ability to produce literary work of distinct thematic background. Although he is most famous for his adventure novels and short stories – among others, *To Build a Fire*, *Daughter of the Snows*, *White Fang*, *The Call of the Wild* – which take place in the American North, London proved himself a worthy author of several love stories, as well as stories with elements of horror. However, he believed that such a genre could not produce great literary work: in *Martin Eden*, a semi-autobiographical novel, we sense London's change of attitude in the following lines: "*his horror stories . . . he did not consider high work. To him they were frankly imaginative and fantastic [...] This investiture of the grotesque and impossible with reality, he looked upon as a trick-----a skilful trick at the best. Great literature could not reside in such a field.*"<sup>9</sup>

His disenchantment with horror-infused stories lead London to dedicate himself to a more realistic approach to storytelling. His novels and short stories set in the Northland were the ones which brought him timeless fame and recognition. London changed not only the setting and the general theme of his work, but also the narrative, replacing the existing one with the third person narrative, the most commonly used narrative at the time.<sup>10</sup>

Jack London's work draws inspiration from his adventurous and bohemian life which could only be shaped the way it was at that particular point in history and in that particular spot: United States, seeking new territories, new riches, and new exploits was precisely what a young adventure-seeking vagrant could desire.

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<sup>9</sup> London (2004)

<sup>10</sup> McClintock (1997: 15)



Both authors were public sweethearts during their lifetime, achieving success and admiration after a certain period of trying to find themselves in this world. Though disregarded by various critics throughout history, their narratives have all the while continued to gain attention and appreciation of the general public.

### 1.1. CHANCE

“Stevenson passionately believed that the greater part of life was chance!”<sup>11</sup> He maintained that a great part of human life is steered by random and unpredictable circumstances<sup>12</sup> which leads to a conclusion that Stevenson essentially saw life as an adventure, with unexpected occurrences incidentally directing the course of it.

The notion of chance and circumstance is the focal point in the analysis of Robert Louis Stevenson’s as well as Jack London’s literary work. It is what acts as the writer himself: it moulds the characters and shapes the storyline, seizes the reader and grants him the opportunity to immerse himself within a different world. In London’s *Before Adam*, for instance, the reader can note the author’s emphasis on chance in one’s life: “*As I look back I see clearly how our lives and destinies are shaped by the merest chance*”<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, in the aforementioned novel – as argues Bloom – “*the narrator uses [an episode] to stress yet again the workings of chance rather than design*” and explains how it was a chance that shaped the relationship of man and the animal: Big Tooth believes that had he been given a chance, he possibly could have domesticated a wolf, or rather, a dog. The relationship between these two is then a product not only of circumstances, but of chance as well.

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<sup>11</sup> Bloom (2005: 29)

<sup>12</sup> Bloom (2005: 30)

<sup>13</sup> London (2009)

Lawrence Berkove elaborates his view which concerns the Darwinian concept of the “struggle for existence”, saying that survival does not merely depend upon skill or ability, but also upon mere chance. *“The word “fittest,” moreover, does not have a clear definition, for what is “fit” in one situation may be unfit in another. Therefore, insofar as survival is a matter of chance rather than contest, “fittest” can have only an empirical and not an ethical meaning.”*<sup>14</sup>

Chance is not a cause of morality or the lack of it; it is random and unpredictable, its only purpose to give the skilful a possibility to fail, and the inept an opportunity to thrive; it exists to balance the good and the bad, the honest and the corrupt, the cunning and the naïve, and put them all back at the starting line of the race commonly known as “life”, “survival”, or “success”, for these three become synonymous in Jack London’s narrative.

Different circumstances ask for a different approach: where stubbornness cost another dog his life once he refused to obey the law of the club, it granted Buck survival when he refused to blindly follow the orders of the foolish. There are two possible ways of discerning what kind of conduct particular circumstances require: a riskier alternative would be letting the instinct be entirely in charge of one’s demeanour; the other would be relying of one’s own experience, possibly the most valuable instructor in a tale of survival.

Hammond offers an example of such experience which broadens one’s chances of success found in Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (Jim Hawkins) and *Kidnapped* (David Balfour) and draws a parallel between the protagonists of these two narratives: *“Neither is a static character: each commences his narrative in a state of innocence and slowly gains in maturity through a process of experience and interaction. Each comes into contact with a spectrum of adult values and measures his own view of the world against that experience.”* It is worth noting that both authors value experience over knowledge imparted artificially. To London’s

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<sup>14</sup> Bloom (2005: 128)

Buck, for instance, personal experience in the North is of much greater value than the manners he had learned at Judge Miller's residence. In fact, it is the knowledge that was passed on to him by Judge Miller that proved to be almost an obstacle, or at least a vulnerability in the primitive surroundings.

Similarly, Stevenson advocates a natural, subconscious response to a situation without spending endless time in pondering about the consequences. "*Stevenson uses economic metaphors to describe adventure fiction as a type of speculation on an uncertain future, and recommends, with Thoreau, that no one should 'reckon up possible accidents' in the course of life.*"<sup>15</sup> In other words, he does not lull us to carelessness as he proves – with the help of his misfortunate characters – that by allowing ourselves to opt for a certain type of conduct without much speculation, we are also presented with a great risk of possible mishaps. For instance, Doctor Henry Jekyll, the character of Stevenson's emblematic Gothic fiction work, made a leap of faith by drinking his potion, which was proven ineffective in dividing the good side of him from the evil one. Another exceptional example is found in Stevenson's *Treasure Island* in which we learn about Jim Hawkins's fate rife with nightmares which haunt him throughout his adult life. Stevenson presents us with these examples that are intended to serve as a reminder of the power of choice, which can measure up to the power of chance.

A great example of a protagonist not fully comprehending the law of chance and circumstance is presented in Jack London's famous short story *To Build a Fire* in which a man is sentenced to death by the crude touch of reality: his circumstance is his greatest adversary and the bearer of his greatest peril – death itself. He understood all too well how slim his chances of survival were, but he lacked the skill and respect towards the basic principles of life in the places where the only ruler is nature itself. It was the circumstance which was the man's greatest enemy, and it was his decision to rely upon his feeble

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<sup>15</sup> Fielding (2010: 4)

knowledge of those circumstances which lead him to give in to a force much greater than he allowed himself to comprehend. He was presented with a chance which he did not recognise, but chance is not a commodity on which one should rely. He must seize it and be grateful he was granted to experience its presence.

#### 1.1.1. NATURE

*The Call of the Wild* is undoubtedly not only the most famous, but the most original story published by Jack London. One of the key elements of this novel is instinct, intertwined with the primitive – or the primordial. This motif, though, is found in many other works by Jack London.

Let us consider London's novel *White Fang*: contrary to Buck, White Fang trusts the man who finds him because of his instincts. Taking into account the theory proposed in *Before Adam*, an individual remembers all the events that happened in his ancestors' lives but only if they had happened prior to this individual's birth, since all these new experiences thus become a part of one's DNA and are passed over to his descendants. If Buck is White Fang's ancestor, White Fang instinctively knows whom he can trust. This elaborate theory is diffused throughout various London's novels and short stories and once the reader realises a certain connection between them, he finds himself amazed by the author's creativity.

It is the severity and cruelty of nature which prompts the return to the primitive. An individual finds within himself a part that remembers ancient times and realises that this same nature nurtured and thrashed his own ancestors.

Stevenson believed that an individual feels himself becoming the nature itself by allowing his senses to respond naturally to his surroundings: in his essay *Walking Tours*,

Stevenson writes: “*As the day goes on, the traveller moves from the one extreme towards the other. He becomes more and more incorporated with the material landscape, and the open-air drunkenness grows upon him with great strides, until he posts along the road, and sees everything about him, as in a cheerful dream. The first is certainly brighter, but the second stage is the more peaceful.*”<sup>16</sup> Here Stevenson proposes the actual reason of the return to one’s roots: an individual returns to his past in order to find peace within himself. If the purpose of living is to find peace within one’s self, then the greatest way to achieve that is to listen to one’s own instincts, which would then lead him all the way back into the past, into the primitive.

Both London and Stevenson favoured nature over life in the city. In his letters, Jack London even calls citizens *beasts*: “*That’s all they are – beasts – if they are anything like the slum people of New York – beasts shot through with stray flashes of divinity.*”<sup>17</sup> Life in the city, which symbolises the over-civilised society, is considered more than anything, limitative to human nature.

### 1.1.2. INDIVIDUAL VS. SOCIETY

Jack London was a devout socialist, famously arrested for his strong encouragement of socialism, yet the protagonists of his stories and novels are too often individualists. London’s work features a strong desire of an individual to flourish on his own, struggling, yet never

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<sup>16</sup> Stevenson, Robert L. (2012)

<sup>17</sup> Phillips (2012: 5)

simply receding in front of many challenges. One may say that London's private life was contradictory to the world he created in his writing, but there is a moral message in the acts of his individualist heroes: an exceptional individual may prosper relying solely on his own abilities and adaptability, but he takes upon himself a much greater risk of distress and peril. As Charles Child Walcutt states, "*It was this complex of ideas, contradictions and all, that captured the [...] mind of young Jack London and permeated his writing. (...) We may be led to understand how he came to fight — in his private life and in his work — up and down the line between Social Darwinism and social justice, between individualism and socialism.*" Walcutt goes on to explain that London had the intellectual ability to comprehend the necessity of socialist virtues among the helpless and the hopeless, and simultaneously to feel the power of Nietzschean individual, a superman who succeeds by the means of his physical strength, a great will, and hard labour. Perhaps he does not necessarily laud socialism, but merely tries to find a route out of the existent political situation.

London himself claimed that *Martin Eden* was an anti-individualist story considering individualism was Martin's downfall: "*Not one blessed reviewer has discovered that this book is an attack on individualism, that Martin Eden died because he was so utter an individualist that he was unaware of the needs of others, and that, therefore, when his illusions vanished, there was nothing for him for which to live.*"<sup>18</sup> Taking into account that *Martin Eden* is generally regarded as a semi-autobiography, and that London used events from his personal life to build a world within his narrative, a conclusion can be drawn that the author's commentary was a direct remark addressed to his own life.

The original idea of a primitive beast goes all the way back to Émile Zola's literary work. In the description of his characters, Émile Zola, the very founder of the literary naturalist movement, using the term *human animals* explains how instincts essentially take

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<sup>18</sup> Walcutt (1966: 35)

over socially constructed virtues. The process of the characters' descent into the primitive may be considered a metaphor for the lower social classes intermingling with the highly ranked elite of the society, obtaining their new position in the social hierarchy. The term *human beasts* thus signifies people from the lower social classes or of ethnicities considered primitive. A lack of acceptance or resistance towards things primitive and things primordial are almost always visible at the beginning of naturalist novels, essays, and short stories. However, as the story progresses, the literary subject begins to develop an understanding for that which he once dreaded or considered unworthy. The best teacher will forever be experience, and it would be fair to say that as the authors gained new experiences, so did their characters.

By means of his novel *Before Adam*, London proposes an idea of rank in society as a natural, innate thing, where the primitive is clearly a metaphor for social class. On the other hand, we can tackle the view of primitives as proposed by Lothrop Stoddard in his *The Revolt against Civilization: The Menace of the UnderMan*. He states that civilization, in its advancement, “leaves behind multitudes of human beings who have not the capacity to keep pace. [...] Some are congenital savages or barbarians; men who could not fit into any civilization, and who consequently fall behind from the start. These are not “degenerates”; they are “primitives,” carried over into a social environment in which they do not belong.”<sup>19</sup> Here, the primitives are regarded as outcasts, different from the rest: they are seen as pure individualists.

Rossetti is in support of the theory which sees a descent to the primitive as a metaphor for socially-constructed hierarchy, and adds that “*Buck’s reversion to primitivism serves as a critique of urban capitalism*”<sup>20</sup> and “*returns him to a precapitalist culture and reunites him*

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<sup>19</sup> Rossetti (2006: 69-70)

<sup>20</sup> Rossetti (2006: 47)

*with his native tribal community.*<sup>21</sup> She further explains that Buck's final descent into the depths of the primitive (the moment when Buck kills and feels content with this accomplishment of his) as well as his loss of morality which characterised him in his early life, suggest "*the breakdown of community and the ruthless and rugged individualism that are needed in Buck's brutal capitalist environment.*"<sup>22</sup>

Various authors are in support of this theory which argues that the brute – the primitive – represents the lowly classes of society. In his *What The Social Classes Owe To Each Other* from 1883, William Graham Sumner argues that it is the society which creates the brutes, and what is society but that which surrounds an individual? Sumner goes on to say that "*if society does not keep up its power, (...), it falls back toward the natural state of barbarism from which it rose.*"<sup>23</sup> Without delving deeper into the problems of capitalism, labour, and an individual's desire to contribute to a government, Sumner's argument could help us conclude that it is the society that is directly responsible for the creation, as well as the loss of the most refined manners of behaviour.

### 1.1.3. THE PRIMITIVE

Stevenson's writing indicates the psychological view of children's behaviour which is seen as natural, unable to be estimated in terms of moral standards. Their conduct is pure and unobstructed by relentless thought-processing, and, hence, it is *natural*. As a child develops, it is instructed in morality so that his actions as an adult are never spontaneous, but measured or even cunning. "*Evolutionary psychologists, such as Stevenson's friend James Sully, saw*

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<sup>21</sup> Rossetti (2006: 48)

<sup>22</sup> Rossetti (2006: 51)

<sup>23</sup> Sumner (2006)



*children's play as central to understanding the origins of the human species as children retain 'primitive' impulses and behaviours that become obscured in the adult by social and moral compulsion*"<sup>24</sup> This approach saw children's behaviour in no need of correction. Considering that Stevenson was an advocate of spontaneous, natural reaction to one's situation, employing independent, adventurous boys as protagonists of many of his narratives would be most subtle, yet most resonating message to the reader: though a protagonist is not always likely to inspire a change in the reader's conduct, his personality lingers in the reader's mind since he can associate this adventurous youngster with his own youth.

The primitive may be interpreted literally, in a sense that an individual feels within himself the presence of his ancestors and finds himself overwhelmed by the circumstance in which he had never found himself before, yet was able to experience through his ancestors' senses. The return to one's roots may have the simplest explanation: a return to the natural state of affairs where groups of beings, though possibly ranked by their status, live in accordance with nature, unencumbered by capitalism, materialism, gambling, opiate addiction, and other maladies of the present, modern societies.

This – more general – interpretation of London's narrative is also supported by Gina Rossetti: "*In his dreams, Buck's younger world, one that is much like the one depicted in the later London novel Before Adam, has many atavistic features that remind Buck of his ancient heritage of wild dogs and that tell him this environment, rather than the one populated by modern men, is his natural home*"<sup>25</sup>

London believed that by learning more we actually learn less if we do not experience what is passed on to us through stories. A return to the primitive, according to London, helps one appreciate the true power of knowledge. The novel *A Daughter of the Snows* sums up

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<sup>24</sup> Fielding (2010: 6)

<sup>25</sup> Rossetti (2006: 52)

London's main focus in the theory of primitivism: "[...] *man's adaptability depends upon his possession of primitive qualities that existed before men became highly specialized and therefore incapable of adapting to new challenges.*"<sup>26</sup>

Stevenson was in favour of the idea of one's primitive version of self which takes over an individual once he is found too clasped and contracted by the clear-cut limits by which the modern society is able to hold an individual in control. Similarly to London, he believes the primitive is what brings one back in time unhampered by these limitations. Stephen Arata adds that "*where most evolutionists adhered to a progressive narrative of gradual imaginative refinement, Stevenson celebrated the endurance of states of primitive consciousness, and even suggested that they might rejuvenate an overcivilised modern world*"<sup>27</sup>

The primitive as a theme is present in Stevenson's famous narrative *In the South Seas* where we can notice – argues Reid – that the narrative "*seems to endorse [...] belief that modern 'savages' were survivals from an earlier evolutionary stage*"<sup>28</sup>

The theory of the return to one's roots as an escape from the complexities and intricacies of the modern world is supported by Roslyn Jolly: "[Stevenson] was going among people who, although his contemporaries, were 'as remote in thought and habit as Rob Roy or Barbarossa, the Apostles or the Caesars'. The opportunity to observe ways of life so ancient and so alien powerfully attracted one whose writings reflected a long- running quarrel with modern civilisation"<sup>29</sup> Here we can establish a link between Stevenson and London, who both sought an escape from coeval communities, and found that escape by delving into the past, all the way back into the primordial.

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<sup>26</sup> Walcutt (1966: 18)

<sup>27</sup> Fielding (2010: 53)

<sup>28</sup> Reid (2006: 143)

<sup>29</sup> Fielding (2010: 118)

Primitive should not be mistaken for lowly or vile; during Stevenson's time primitive was equated with criminal, and the infamous character of Mister Hyde of Stevenson's famous novella *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde* was generally believed to be the embodiment of primitive. However, Stephen Arata argues that though Hyde was violent and impulsive, ultimately he was a *gentleman*<sup>30</sup>, hence, he belonged to the upper class.

*“The thin dividing line between 'civilisation' [...] and 'barbarism' [...] is strikingly presented. As the tale unfolds one is increasingly aware of the veneer separating urbanity and primitiveness, and the manner in which behaviour is affected by environment: themes which frequently recur in Stevenson's work.”*<sup>31</sup> Common traits of primitive behaviour, therefore, are a direct consequence of circumstances.

Perhaps London wants to tell us that the primitive is not only the possible, but the necessary alternative. However, we must not let ourselves forget the circumstance in which London's famous character Buck had found himself. Would he have embraced the primordial beast which so quietly existed somewhere deep inside his being for years and for centuries, had he not been snatched from his *“lazy, sun-kissed life”*<sup>32</sup>? Would he have let the primitive corrupt the very behaviour which had earned him nothing but respect and admiration in the circumstance which finds those moulded by societal norms of elevated behaviour most pleasing examples of advanced civilisation?

## 1.2. CIRCUMSTANCE

Émile Zola maintained that there should be no difference discerned between behaviour – human reaction to circumstance – and circumstance itself, since from his point of view, man

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<sup>30</sup> Bloom (2005: 187)

<sup>31</sup> Hammond (1984: 88)

<sup>32</sup> London (1981: 55)

would eventually discover how to manage and control circumstance, which would in turn be a result of human demeanour.<sup>33</sup> Stevenson opposed Zola's beliefs and found his own ideas similar to those of Sigmund Freud: he found a great value in the subconscious and held that it was the subconscious which reacted to the circumstance, and as such, cannot be moulded and directed by one's desires.<sup>34</sup>

The same point of view was held by Jack London, who sought to employ the discovery of the subconscious as a motif in many of his narratives. Possibly the greatest example of this statement is Jack London's character Buck, a sled dog sold to men seeking a way out of poverty in the Klondike gold rush. Buck was unwillingly and abruptly presented with new circumstances which asked not whether he would accept their realness and respect their existence, but merely posed a choice: obey or perish. Being an intelligent beast he was, Buck let adaptability take over the knowledge passed on to him in the course of his 4-year-long life; he put his pride aside and let the circumstances mould his character. Circumstances inspire change, and, as expected, change may not take place in stagnant circumstances.

*"No lazy, sun-kissed life was this, with nothing to do but loaf and be bored. 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."*<sup>35</sup> It was not what Buck had learned. It was not what Buck had known. Every situation was new and dangerous, and Buck had to learn fast if he wanted to survive.

The severity of the circumstances is also greatly presented in London's stories *The White Silence*, *To Build a Fire*, and *Bâtard*, which all share tragedy as a common characteristic.

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<sup>33</sup> Bloom (2005: 28)

<sup>34</sup> Bloom (2005: 29)

<sup>35</sup> London (1981: 55)

A change of circumstances isn't always a change of a natural setting which requires a return to one's instincts; it may very well be a change in the social setting, which can be noted in London's *Martin Eden*: "*He was surrounded by the unknown, apprehensive of what might happen, ignorant of what he should do, aware that he walked and bore himself awkwardly.*"<sup>36</sup> Martin's dismay is even more pronounced once he is addressed as *Mister Eden*. This is an entirely new circumstance for Martin, never been called "mister" before in his life, who then begins to yearn for a higher social rank, quite unsuccessfully.<sup>37</sup>

It is circumstance which triggers the return to the primordial, and merely a change of one's setting can bring him to an understanding of his own past. Stevenson based his travel books on his own personal travels which he considered a journey back to the past. "*the impression received was not so much of foreign travel – rather of past ages; it seemed not so much degrees of latitude that we had crossed as centuries of time we had re-ascended*"<sup>38</sup>, notes Stevenson in his book *In the South Seas*. Was it also the change of surroundings which prompted Jack London's apprehension of the past? We already mentioned that both authors were greatly influenced by their travels and by the experiences to which they had not been accustomed. Though it may also be applicable to London, it is generally known that Robert Louis Stevenson was prone to escaping the troubles and responsibilities of his life: during his childhood, affected by ill health, young Stevenson found escape in imagination; in his adult life, seeking a means of escape from the codes of conduct ruling the Victorian era, he turned to voyage which would introduce him to people whose lifestyle would inspire Stevenson to seek escape within himself, by returning to the primitive.

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<sup>36</sup> London (2004)

<sup>37</sup> Rossetti (2006: 78)

<sup>38</sup> Reid (2006: 143)

Another common trait between the two authors is their lack of concern for what is expected of them within the society they should belong to: they did what they wanted to do, never feeling the need to justify their actions.

Considering both London and Stevenson employed the motif of the primitive in a great deal of their work, and considering this comprehension of the primitive was fuelled by the mutability of circumstances in the authors' lives, we can list circumstance as one of the main themes of their work, alongside chance and the primitive.

### 1.2.1. THE MAN

Taking London's famous works, *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* as the examples of at least a fragment of London's literary work, one may realise the significant role that is given to the man. The man, in both of these stories, acts as a switch between the primordial and the civilised. It is the man who is the reason behind Buck's progress from a refined animal to a cunning beast, as well as behind White Fang's transformation from the wild beast to a man's most loyal companion. The man plays a crucial role in the unravelling of the dogs' new personalities.

However, if we take a look at the man himself, not in relation to other species, we may notice the influence of numerous schools of thought existing during London's and Stevenson's lives. One of the greatest influences is that of Friedrich Nietzsche's theory of *superman*, whom both London and Stevenson employ in their stories as a representative of what the author desires to become himself.

Gina Rossetti beautifully distinguishes between primitivism and barbarism on the example of Wolf Larsen from London's *The Sea Wolf*, stating that in this particular novel

“primitivism is identified with the extraordinary individualism that underlies the Nietzschean “superman.””<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, common barbarism can be identified in *The Sea Wolf* among other crew members of the ship. Rossetti’s interpretation further upholds that London never painted primitivism as something negative or even immoral; the primordial beasts London speaks of have roots back in the ancient history when man and nature were one and socially constructed norms of behaviour, together with morality, were not yet invented. Hence, London’s brutes cannot be judged by the norms of modern society since they do not belong in it: they are primordial and eternal, never allowing to be limited within a certain era. Furthermore, in the natural state of affairs, survival is always a priority over morals.

In London’s *Burning Daylight*, the man – who is a marvellous representation of both a socialist and an individualist<sup>40</sup> – represents a natural force demanding justice for other’s actions.<sup>41</sup> This force grants survival to those willing to adapt.

Some argue that the protagonist in *The Call of the Wild* is not actually a dog, but a man cloaked in metaphor. Since London himself loved to be addressed as “Wolf”, critics suggest that this novel stands for London’s desire for escape, his innate longing for the return to the nature, to his roots, and to his ancestors’ beliefs. “*He wrote of animals as if they were people —and of people as if they were animals, recognizing no essential difference between human and animal societies.*”<sup>42</sup> Though Buck could have been Jack all along, a more important goal, and, at last, accomplishment of the novel is to draw the reader into the world of the American North, into the time of the Yukon Gold Rush, and finally, into Buck’s mind. The reader may let primary focus remain on whether a particular wolf represented a particular

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<sup>39</sup> Rossetti (2006: 54)

<sup>40</sup> Walcutt (1966: 41)

<sup>41</sup> Walcutt, (1966: 27)

<sup>42</sup> Walcutt (1966: 24)

human, or he may accept the more general approach: that each reader can identify with this astounding individual.

Among London's Northland stories, one worth mentioning is surely *Bâtard*, which, alongside *The Call of the Wild*, offers a culmination of London's fascination with the primordial: "An open space in a dark forest, a ring of grinning wolf-dogs, and in the centre two beasts, locked in combat, snapping and snarling, raging madly about, panting, sobbing, cursing, straining, wild with passion, in a fury of murder, ripping and tearing and clawing in elemental brutishness"<sup>43</sup> The passage overflowing with energy and passion takes the reader to the very core of the American North; the reader becomes Bâtard, Buck, White Fang, Wolf Larsen, Big Tooth and is brought to understand what it means to be in touch with one's primordial, atavistic self. The human and the animal become indistinguishable, both brimming with fervour and with fury; both under the same circumstances, hoping that the chance will favour *them*. London calls them both *beasts*, pointing out that their actions were brutish, relating them thus to their ancestors who have also stood against one another, raging and snarling. The same fight was fought several millennia ago and the memory of it remained untouched until the present day, for in that moment the primordial seemed to have emerged from the depth of their being.

## 2. PROPERTIES OF THE ADVENTURE NARRATIVE

*"The adventure story, like any fiction written and read within the conventions of a popular genre, does not present itself as a way of knowing a complex social world represented within its pages. It promises the pleasures of genre itself, of narrative expectations aroused, frustrated and fulfilled, rather than the effect of encountering the reality*

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<sup>43</sup> London (1981: 27)



*of a specific society in all its historical complexity.*”<sup>44</sup> Bloom here offers his definition of adventure narrative which, according to him, surpasses a particular place and time since its essence remains applicable to any venture, and apprehensible to just any individual in the search of something new.

From Stevenson’s point of view, adventure is not something that needs to be justified nor something for which an individual should ask permission. To him it was an almost sacred concept which is often presented as the source of life itself. It should not, according to Stevenson, ever be limited by the social or moral conventions for it is a pure and timeless reminder of one’s desire for accomplishment, knowledge, and experience.<sup>45</sup>

### **3. MORALS VS. SURVIVAL**

The reader will often find himself sympathising with protagonists of London’s and Stevenson’s narratives: he will forgive them for decisions which he would sharply condemn within different circumstances. How can we argue what should be considered moral and what should be damned and deemed immoral if we do not take into account the circumstances, which, according to Stevenson, steer the subconscious decisions of conduct? “*Continually the point is being made that human nature is not a constant, that it is changing in response to events, that such apparently simple concepts as 'vice', 'virtue', 'disloyalty' and 'evil' are capable of differing interpretations in the light of circumstances.*”<sup>46</sup>

Even if something is objectively considered ‘immoral’, it may not strike us as such given a change of circumstances in which this ‘immoral’ act is conducted. In any case, Robert

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<sup>44</sup> Fielding (2010: 27)

<sup>45</sup> Bloom (2005: 40)

<sup>46</sup> Hammond (1984: 20)

Louis Stevenson is very critical of human notion of morality, which he demonstrates in his essay *Pulvis et Umbra* when he states that the human race shapes morality the way it suits them at the time: as long as it is “emasculate” and “sentimentalised”, the human race accepts it without much contemplation, for this kind of morality suits its wishes.<sup>47</sup>

How can something – or, rather, someone – be deemed immoral if that certain someone has never learned the rules of not more but a social agreement upon morality? From Stevenson’s point of view there is something other than *moral* and *immoral*: “*There is a vast deal in life and letters both which is not immoral, but simply a-moral; [...] where the interest turns [...] not on the passionate slips and hesitations of the conscience, but on the problems of the body and of the practical intelligence, in clean, open- air adventure, the shock of arms or the diplomacy of life.*”<sup>48</sup>

Certain critics argue that London’s famous character Buck is a man metaphorically portrayed as a wolf since it would be easier for the reader to discern between the moral and immoral in the behaviour of somebody non-human. Whether this is true or not, a question remains if the general public, especially during London’s life, would have responded the same way had the protagonist been a human being. This only further testifies to the frailty of norms of moral conduct.

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<sup>47</sup> Stevenson (2004)

<sup>48</sup> Fielding (2010: 17-18)

## CONCLUSION

The goal of this paper was to establish links between Robert Louis Stevenson's and Jack London's narratives, especially by emphasizing the importance of chance and circumstance in their literary work. Throughout the research various issues related to the notion of chance and the notion of circumstance became evident, such as the issue of morality or pride once chance is not in an individual's favour and circumstances are altered. Another important conflict that was discussed in this paper is the one between an individual and the society; the conclusion that was drawn that both authors were in favour of independence and individualism, though they rationally point out the downfalls of individualism as well. Another notion discussed was the primitive, often regarded as a negative trait. By researching both Stevenson's and London's literary work it has been concluded that neither of the authors depicted the primitive negatively; on the contrary, they presented in an entirely different light from their contemporaries, leading us to conclude that it was the authors' experience which prompted them to regard the nature and the primitive differently than they might have had they not decided to dedicate their lives to the adventure and exploring.

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