
Living in tune with nature means respecting the natural environment and realizing its power and the ways it manifests in daily life. This essay focuses on the ways in which respect for nature is expressed through animal imagery in Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God, Mark Twain’s “The Stolen White Elephant,” Roughing It, and Pudd’nhead Wilson, and Jack London’s The Call of the Wild. Each author encouraged readers to seek the benefits of nature in order to become better human beings, forge stronger communities, and develop a more unified nation and world. By learning from the positive example of the animals, we learn how to share our world with them and with each other.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In 2008, “green” is a buzzword, its use indicating an awareness of current environmental issues as well as the hope that environmental awareness becomes a permanent part of American lives. However, as Glen Love has pointed out, “The disquieting fact is that we have grown inured to the bad news of human and natural disasters. The catalog of actual and potential environmental crises is by now familiar to us all, so familiar as to have become dismissible (14). It seems acceptable then that if we ignore the natural environment in real life (with the exception of its saving resurfacing as a fad every few years), we must, more than ever before, keep up an awareness in our literature. Of the American nature writers, the list nearly always begins with Henry David Thoreau and then includes a variegated catalog that includes Mary Austin, Aldo Leopold, James Fennimore Cooper, and Ralph Waldo Emerson (Love 27, 32; Mason 4, 9), among others. Nature has become embedded in our literature. The pastoral, says Andrew Ettin, much “like the terms tragedy and comedy…are permanently parts of our thinking and writing” (qtd. in Love 65). And in this valuable nature writing I have noticed a trend in American culture but not a recent one. The idea that an ever-increasing modernization of America lends itself to a gradual but continuous disregard for nature and the animal is an issue that authors were addressing in fiction over a century ago. As critic Jennifer Mason indicates, “In American literary and cultural studies, the second half of the nineteenth century is universally understood to be a period of intense interest in animals and their relationships to people” (1). Mason attributes this idea to the growing disillusionment with human nature. In the decades after the Civil War, Americans perceived unprecedented levels of greed and self-interest in their now thoroughly urban, industrial, capitalist society. Indifferent to the wealth and prestige that
increasingly stratified social relations, the animals people encountered in the built environment seemed to many to be more honest, more generous, more loyal—in short more civilized—than many of the people who lived there. (19-20)

However, I have noticed that this attitude, important to more than just the general populace as Mason indicates (as general populaces are often fickle), is a permanent attitude of those authors who write about nature and animals. This study attempts to take a look at three authors’ interpretations of being in tune with nature. I see the works of Zora Neale Hurston (Their Eyes Were Watching God), Mark Twain (“The Stolen White Elephant,” Roughing It, and Pudd’nhead Wilson), and Jack London (The Call of the Wild) using animal imagery to show nature’s benefits for the individual human and ultimately pointing to elements of the nation at large. I see their works acknowledging and critiquing the phenomenon of how unnatural nature is for much of the American public, poignant then as well as now. These works serve as both a warning against devaluing nature as well as a reminder that humans are not the only animals that matter. We are not here alone. We share this space we call the world, and it is in our best interest that we continue to do so.

Being in tune with nature means being aware of, living in harmony with, and respecting the natural environment. I see in the works of Hurston, Twain, and London an important connection to the larger picture (self, community, and nation). Interestingly, each author uses animals as metaphors to contrast humans. The animals function in their own right meaning that their actions are not aligning them with humanity. Instead the animals in all these works are demonstrating to the human a better way to live. They exemplify ways that the human can live in harmony with nature: Hurston demonstrates the human in touch with the environment so much so that animals are part of human daily interaction. Twain’s animals are then used as representations of the good in humankind that humanity tends to ignore. London exemplifies
how an embrace of animal instinct keeps the true nature of the self in focus. All these authors have similar threads in their works, and one unifying theme is that humans in general and Americans specifically must reign in and control the power we hold over the other beings in our world. These works were important in their time to serve as reminders and guidance. They are important now as environmental issues are surfacing again, and as we are only a few years past the last turn of the century. The concern over the human’s living in harmony with nature is an issue that remains vital today, and this essay will show how maintaining respect for nature and being in tune with the environment is vital to a worthy life according to Hurston, Twain, and London.

I have chosen Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as I feel it best represents a time in America’s past when nature was fully ingrained in people’s lives. The novel, set in southeast America—Florida and the Everglades—signifies the new beginning of the country after Reconstruction with a theme of rebuilding. And though Hurston’s 1937 novel comes after Twain and London in a chronological timeline, I place it first as I see the novel representing an attitude and lifestyle of the past; her work shows the roots of American culture and the importance of a natural life, remembering where we came from and where we might be headed. Specifically, Hurston’s human characters live a life in constant interaction with animals that animals have become a normal part of their everyday existence, exemplified in not only the language they use with each other but the causal and friendly tone of Hurston’s narration as she introduces the reader to this world. Second, much like the nation’s rebuilding itself, Hurston’s protagonist Janie Starks is continually rebuilding her life through her work. Janie is surrounded by animal descriptions and references that change as she moves through the novel from husband to husband and job to job. And though *Their Eyes* embraces the past and contains echoes of
slavery, with each turn Janie’s life takes, her work represents a growing American culture as nature, self, and the community. Moreover, the animals in Their Eyes are in the tradition of the animal tale of African American folklore and prove to be the wisest of all. They maintain natural instincts that warn them of the approaching storm, so their mass exodus should serve as a warning to all the people of the community. In that it does not, Hurston uses the power of nature to show the importance of living in tune with natural instinct. Interestingly, as Hurston’s work represents the community of the Southeast, Twain’s work becomes the larger nation as a whole.

I have placed Mark Twain and several of his animal sketches together as a second example to the American nation of how to live in harmony with nature. In the short story “The Stolen White Elephant” and the novels Roughing It and Pudd’nhead Wilson, Twain provides a lesson for America in the form of the fable, and in this way his work also follows in the African American oral tradition, much like Hurston’s work. However, Twain’s fables specifically set up his animals to stand in direct opposition to negative American attitudes that reject life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In “The Stolen White Elephant” and Roughing It, Twain uses exotic animals (known only to those with the wealth to visit zoos or participate in a safari) to critique the notion of a life spent seeking great wealth and fame at the cost of the environment and one’s fellowman. These works speak out against American attitudes of superiority. Twain stresses the importance of respecting all life (nature, the environment, and your fellow man), not just one’s own. Then I look at the novel Pudd’nhead Wilson. When Wilson makes a subversive joke about wanting to own half of an obnoxious dog so he can be justified in killing his half, the white townspeople remain blind to their own injustices to African Americans. In this scene, I see the novel speaking out against not only the institution of slavery but continued racial disparity and denied liberties from Reconstruction through the beginning of the twentieth century. I then
revisit *Roughing It* to examine Twain’s town-dog and an ill-fated coyote chase as an example of true freedom of the mind or the freedom to pursue thoughts and dreams while understanding one’s own limitations. Twain uses all these animals in order to show his ideal version of American life and society as well as his idea that animals are more virtuous than humans. Moreover, I have placed Twain in between Hurston and London in order to conceptualize the idea of spanning the country geographically—from the Southeast to the West. Twain’s animals cross the country as Twain did and represent his attitudes at the turn of the nineteenth century, an important time period in history to compare to the turn of the twentieth. Specifically, Twain insists that humans must be aware of the dangerous potential we hold in ourselves individually and in the nation collectively.

Furthermore, if Hurston’s work provides a view of the community and Twain’s of the nation (all imaged through animals and nature), Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild* shows a view of the world. The novel begins in the West, in California, and passes America’s borders, embracing the turn-of-the-century idea of imperialism and the push for worldwide advancement of America. In this way, London agreed with President Theodore Roosevelt, yet they differed when Roosevelt’s attitude of dominance included nature. Roosevelt advocated what he called “The Strenuous Life” in which he threw himself into nature (generally into ranches and game preserves) to conquer the “wild” in order to prove his own masculinity. Roosevelt encouraged all white American males to follow suit. I see in *The Call of the Wild* London using the animal Buck’s genuine change throughout the novel to show the futility of pretending to change, which was the reality of Roosevelt’s political image, persona, and agenda. Roosevelt responded not to this scene but to London’s uses of Buck’s “reasoning,” to which London responded by indicating he studied Darwin and applied the scientist’s theories to his literature. From there, I look at Buck
as an example of true Darwinian evolution in his own right. He becomes the ultimate being that a
canine can be, modeling for America the concept of true change. Buck is a fictional
representation of Darwin’s true evolution.

In the works of all of these authors, the humanity of the animals is striking. They serve to
remind us that we are all in this world together. Animals are all around us, whether we choose to
notice them or not. And the importance of animals is that they can serve as a guide. Animals in
literature help to remind us where we have been and provide a focus for where we are going
individually and as a collective people. Following their example is a choice, but Their Eyes, Twain’s various sketches, and The Call of the Wild make a straightforward case. Three
American authors separated by decades all produced works that point towards the same idea: the
animal metaphors provide a good example for humanity. As this essay seeks to show, the
positive benefits of living a life immersed in nature far outweigh the bad.
CHAPTER II

“MULES AND OTHER BRUTES HAD OCCUPIED THEIR SKINS”: THE INGRAINED ANIMAL IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON’S THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

Zora Neale Hurston is no stranger to the ways of animals. As Brian Roberts has indicated “For a woman who had been exposed since early childhood to folktales involving human and animal characters, one of the most salient aspects of any culture [she encountered thereafter] must have been the narratives surrounding the relationships between humans and animals” (40). Because of her extensive background in folklore, Hurston’s work is infused with animal imagery, especially her 1937 novel Their Eyes Were Watching God. Roberts has identified Hurston’s use of animals in the novel, noting, however, that “In the spirit of the signifying animal tale, Hurston camouflages criticism of dominant discourses by embedding critiques of these discourses in animal and human interaction” (39). The dominant discourses Roberts identifies are centered around racial issues of the 1930s, and though I certainly do not deny the likelihood that Hurston included veiled comments in her animal descriptions, I see an entirely different message perhaps so overt it is easily overlooked: a close connection between humans and animals is so important throughout life that it becomes a matter of life and death. Hurston is writing of animal and human interaction to openly address the importance of the human life lived completely in nature, one that embraces the animal in all aspects (leisure and work) in order to maintain lifesaving natural instinct. Though many have noted the connection of Their Eyes and nature, the focus is rarely on the animal. For example, Robert Hemenway critiques Hurston’s use of “organic metaphors” (233), stressing Janie’s sexual awakening through her dreamlike experiences in the garden (where she does interact with birds and bees). Hemenway indicates that though the novel presents a “resolution…of man and nature” (234), it is ultimately Janie’s
“liberation from sexual roles” and her “participation in black tradition” (239), that are the center of the work, and Janie experiences these movements in moments of nature. However, instead of Hurston’s using animals as a veiled reference to society’s ills or hit or miss moments in nature, Hurston’s animals in Their Eyes Were Watching God are worked, widespread, and wise, completely ingrained in the characters. Animals are part of everyday life, there to represent the characters’ personalities and their work. Animals also make up much of the language, of Hurston herself as narrator and the characters’ conversations with each other. Their Eyes shows that animals are tuned in to the environment, and humans would be wise to follow suit. Moreover, Hurston’s animals help to develop ideas of the self and the community in the novel, and much like I will show in Twain’s and London’s work, Hurston’s animals suggest an ideal American culture as one in tune with nature.

Hurston is using Their Eyes to carry on the oral tradition of the animal tale in folklore, and I see Their Eyes as paying homage to this style. Henry Louis Gates has thoroughly dissected Hurston’s place in the African American oral tradition, identifying her work as the ideal demonstration of what he calls the “‘the speakerly text’—‘whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition’—[and] accounts for her being considered an innovator in African-American literature” (qtd. in Hill 14-15). Specifically, “Hurston’s use of free indirect discourse in Their Eyes represents the tension between oral and written narrative forms where the oral wins out by inscribing its style upon the written text” (Hill xxix). The use of animals in language throughout the novel provides a way for Hurston to keep those traditions alive in the twentieth century. I note this because as Lynda Hill suggests, the “animal lore of bygone days” (80) that Hurston loved to study and record began to wane. Franz Boaz recognized that the transition of the folk tale “‘has veered from the animal tale to the exaggeration tale, wherein
stupendous feats of strength or quickness are performed”’ (qtd. in Hill xxviii). Hurston appreciated the classic style of animal tale where animals were walking, talking characters whose actions and adventures (or misadventures) imparted to listeners or readers humor and wisdom. In fact, I see Their Eyes as a novel that makes sure to demonstrate the purposes of the animal tale. The novel shows the wisdom of staying in touch with nature. The characters (specifically Janie Starks) let nature serve as their guide. This essay will show how animals and animal language guide the self, unite the community, and serve as a reminder for humans to live close to nature and maintain natural instincts.

First in my reading of the novel, animals make up the uniting voice of the community as they are so ingrained in the lives of the townspeople that they dominate the language of the characters as well as that of the author in her role as narrator. Though Hurston writes in a third person omniscient style, she infuses herself into the novel as the unnamed narrator, creating the sensation that she is a character right alongside Janie and crew. According to John Callahan, Hurston’s presence in the novel makes sense as her early folklore experiences shaped her later fiction. In the field, in order to be accepted as a listener, “she had to become a performer,” so “Hurston sang on the table, danced, drank coon dick, cussed back, and told stories” (32). The importance I see here is what this participation then did for Their Eyes later. It shaped her conceptions of audience and storyteller, making the two roles one and the same. This essay focuses specifically on Hurston’s use of animal imagery in her narration descriptions. She uses animal references as if they are simply the most logical choice for what she is explaining to the reader. Since the characters in the novel also talk this way, Hurston is connecting the reader to this community. She acts as a friend to the reader, carefully explaining what one might not
automatically understand. Moreover, she makes the ingrained animal language of the characters seem standard to the reader who might not normally speak this way.

Notably, animal references are vital aspects of the community in Their Eyes. The townspeople in both Eatonville and in the Everglades talk to and about each other using animal terminology, and they do this because their communities would not be their communities without animals. That Hurston mentions that “the mule was usually around the store like the other citizens” (58) is nothing extraordinary. Animals permeate their everyday lives and are naturally reflected in their descriptions of the world and of each other. In Eatonville specifically, animals are the essence of the people’s leisure time games. The mule-talkers, those who sit on the Eatonville store porch and pass the time in oral revelry, are united through their animal-coded version of playing the dozens. They play act, speaking of each other as animals and swapping stories and put downs about the famous old yellow mule in town and his neglectful owner, everyone’s favorite part. Importantly though, the characters do not spend their entire lives in leisure time. As I will show, animals do not just mean fun; they also represent work.

Animals in Their Eyes are used to exemplify the different labors Janie endures throughout her life and show the importance of this work to the building of the community. On the surface, Janie’s movement through the novel is from husband to husband and job to job. Critics such as Deborah Plant and Nellie McKay often link Janie’s work to her own self-discovery. However, I suggest Janie’s growing understanding of herself is not an end in itself but more the means to which she recognizes her heritage and the world around her. Moreover, there are echoes of slavery, certainly, but I see work in Their Eyes as representative of the rebuilding of the nation after the Civil War. The country was learning to live again, much like Janie’s rebuilding her life after each time she moves from one husband to another. Each time
Janie experiences three separate types of work. Her first husband, Logan Killicks, puts her to work on his farm. Eventually Janie comes to recognize that her work represents her ties to her family (she comes to understand the obligations she had to her grandmother, Nanny). The work mule exemplifies this particular experience in physical labor. When her life with Logan gets old, Janie begins to fantasize, and Joe Starks becomes her stallion. He puts her to work in the store in Eatonville; here, more than physical labor, Janie experiences mental strain, yet she begins to recognize a “familiar strangeness” (Hurston 48), and finds her own way. However, the experience with Joe ages her; she is the bell-cow at work and the old hen in life. Finally, her third husband, Tea Cake, represents the freest time in Janie’s life. Tea Cake is younger; he becomes her rooster. They are equal in work, but with him Janie’s trust is tested as she learns to follow the “pecking order” (144) of life. Throughout all her work experiences, animals serve as a guide, but one of the most serious aspects of the novel is how the animals display the wisdom with which they guide.

The instinctual wisdom Hurston’s animals possess shows the importance of respect for nature because their guidance proves to be life-saving. The animals are connected to the environment through their senses, and in this way are in contrast to the humans around them. When a great storm comes to the Everglades, the animals know to leave. The humans are slower to react. Even then when some of the people finally choose to leave, many choose to stay. They have already passed the point of no return. Those that only ignore nature are doomed to die in the storm, but closeness to nature proves to be a lifesaver in Hurston’s work. The animals maintain their natural instincts. They remind us to keep in touch with our own, and that is the only way to survive.
Animal Imagery in Language

Animal imagery abounds throughout *Their Eyes*, and it penetrates all aspects of the language—the characters’ dialogues and Hurston’s narration. It is through the language of the characters and the narrator that Henry Louis Gates’s “speakerly text” (the oral tradition presiding over the written in the novel) becomes evident; though the work is written, it feels like conversation. John Callahan notes that “through Janie’s act of storytelling and in the act of earned, easeful collaboration between…her and Hurston, the novel weaves Hurston’s voice into the woof of Janie’s speakerly dialect, Janie’s voice into the warp of Hurston’s writerly vernacular” (145). By uniting Hurston and Janie in his essay, Callahan suggests “Hurston’s rhetorically intimate voice reveals her as a friend to the story” (123). However, I see Hurston acting as a friend to the audience more than to her characters. In fact, my reading recognizes Hurston’s position as narrator and guide. She introduces the reader to this world of the ingrained animal by using animal terminology herself. Animals are so common in the everyday lives of the characters that animals are entrenched in their minds. The people and the animals share the same town. The physical animal and the verbal construction belong there as much as the people, so Hurston uses the most casual animal references, providing an animal analogy as if the reference is the most logical thing to say and aids the understanding of this folk lifestyle, making it accessible to the modernized reader. For example, to describe Janie and Tea Cake’s room in the Everglades, Hurston simply mentions “The room inside looked like the mouth of an alligator—gaped wide open to swallow something down” (118). The image she draws is a common sight in Southern Florida. Hurston also vividly illustrates how people do whatever it is they are doing. Janie’s first husband is working in the yard as she prepares to leave, and “Logan with his shovel looked like a black bear doing some clumsy dance on his hind legs” (31). This type of
description is most effective if the reader has never before seen a black bear dancing. The
casualness of the tone and the humor in the vision alienate Logan so the reader can see him
though Janie’s eyes. He is not the man of her dreams as he is made into a clumsy animal,
preparing the reader for Janie’s exit from the marriage.

    Moreover, at times the narration feels as if Hurston is addressing the reader as a friend, as
if inviting the reader up to sit next to her on the porch. When Mrs. Tony Robbins shows up to
flirt with the men, Hurston, in between the dialogue, leans in to provide a description of Mrs.
Tony almost in a whisper: she is “Something like a hungry cat when somebody approaches her
pan with meat. Running a little, caressing a little and all the time making little urging on cries”
(73). The text feels inviting as Hurston describes Mrs. Tony’s movements as they happen (or as
she expects them to happen) rather than merely recapping at a later date what occurred. A second
example occurs when Joe hands Mrs. Tony too little meat for her order. Hurston explains that
“Mrs. Tony leaped away from the proffered cut of meat as if it were a rattlesnake” (74), a
seemingly vivid description for a person’s grocery shopping trip but effective as no question can
be raised about the urgency in Mrs. Tony’s refutation of Joe’s stinginess. Hurston is taking on
the role of narrator to connect her reader to this folk world through animal imagery in the
language. This is the way the characters speak to each other, and Hurston orients the reader in
the same way.

    Just as Hurston guides the reader through the novel, she also speaks for her characters
when they cannot speak for themselves. For example, Hurston foreshadows Tea Cake’s sickness
by noting “something Sop had told him made his tongue lie cold and heavy like a dead lizard
between his jaws” (179), as he begins to worry. As well, when Janie realizes her relationship
with Joe was changing, she remains speechless, but Hurston notes that “Something stood like an
oxen’s foot on her tongue, and then too, Jody, no Joe, gave her a ferocious look” (84). Animal imagery pervades throughout the novel from Hurston to her readers. At the same time, the characters’ personalities come through in their own dialogues with one another that also serve to demonstrate how normal animals were to them; it makes sense to use them as metaphors. Specifically, the townspeople of Eatonville and the workers in the Everglades come to the forefront here. With both of these groups, their world is not complete without animals. They are commonplace and everyday. It is bonding for them. Animals unite them, particularly at play.

Storytelling is such a large part of the town’s leisure time; it becomes a “contest in hyperbole and carried on for no other reason” (Hurston 63). It is a ritual. It is play-acting. It had a definitive starting point:

Maybe Sam would be sitting on the porch when Lige walked up…with a very grave air. Couldn’t even pass the time of day, for being so busy thinking. Then when he was asked what was the matter in order to start him off, he’d say, “Dis question done ‘bout drove me crazy. And Sam, he know so much into things, Ah wants some information on de subject.”

Walter Thomas was due to speak up and egg the matter on. “Yeah, Sam always got more information than he know what to do wid. He’s bound to tell yuh whatever it is you wants tuh know.”

Sam begins an elaborate show of avoiding the struggle. That draws everybody on the porch into it. (63)

Eventually “they are the center of the world” (64). They put each other down just to see the reaction. Will the other step up or will he be beaten? The bragging, the teasing, the inside jokes, and the good-natured jibbing continue to build. Importantly, these characters make a deep connection to the natural world with their personalities and relationships with each other. This takes place in both communities where “everything was done for a laugh” (134). One of the funniest elements to them is their referrals to each other in animal metaphors. In the challenge of the game, a lesser competitor might be brushed off: “Aw, ‘tain’t nothin’ tuh dat bear but his
curly hair” (134). A confident competitor might then boast that he is “gointuh run dis
conversation from uh gnat heel to uh lice” (64). As they go, they make animal sounds: “they
would ‘woof’ and ‘boogerboo’ around the games to the limit” (134), “howling with laughter”
(145). It is clear that nature is familiar to them because, in general, people talk about what they
know. In fact, during one “argument,” Sam makes a compelling case for the power of nature. He
tells Lige and the others, “It’s de strongest thing dat God ever made, now. Fact is it’s the onliest
ing God ever made. He made nature and nature made everything else” (65). The community as
a whole recognizes its place in nature, therefore recognizing its place in the world. When talking
and having fun with each other, they realize everything and everyone belongs under nature.

The talking fun always leads into the most important game of all—one that is centered
on an animal: the yellow mule is just as important a part of the town as any one of the people.
Though critic Sharon Davie has suggested that the mule-talkers’ purpose is to take “white
stereotypes of blacks as animals” and provide “reversals of those stereotypes, images that upset
the human-animal hierarchy” (452), all the while “[reminding] readers of other [racial]
hierarchies that can be overturned” (449), I want to look at this novel on levels other than race. I
do see a type of human-animal hierarchy that is being overturned: the idea that living a modern,
civilized life must deny animals and nature. I see Hurston’s prolific animal language as a
throwback to the animal tales she discovered were disappearing in folklore. Lynda Hill
comments that into the 1920s and beyond, Hurston had noticed in her fieldwork “the difficulty of
finding tales resembling the animal lore of bygone days but also noted that tales were ‘usually
quite brief, sometimes no more than four of five sentences in length’” (80). In her autobiography
_Dust Tracks on a Road_, Hurston explains that the longer versions of the African American
traditional animal tale consisted of stories about “God, Devil, Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, Sis Cat,
Brer Bear, Lion, Tiger, Buzzard and all the wood folk [who] walked and talked like natural men” (qtd. in Hill xvii-xviii). In Their Eyes Were Watching God, I notice that the most natural men (and women) walk with animals and talk of them. And because Hurston always recognized the traditional significance of the animal tale and missed it as it dwindled, I posit that she included the mule-talkers’ ritual to relive the traditions and recreate the scene for the modern reader. In Their Eyes, instead of just telling stories, the characters live them. The Eatonville townsfolk represent lives so acquainted with nature that animals and animal imagery naturally pervade their language. This game is everyone’s favorite pastime, another community-uniting element. The same group that played the word game as described above (“Same and Lige and Walter were the ringleaders of the mule-talkers” [Hurston 51]), plus others, continually poke fun at one Matt Bonner and his skinny, ornery mule. Suggesting Matt never feeds the animal and overworks him on an empty stomach, they tease, “…dat mule so skinny till de women is usin’ his rib bones fuh uh rub-board, and hangin’ things out on his hock-bones tuh dry” (52). This of course accounts for the mule’s bad attitude, yet the porch always defends him by suggesting “Maybe de mule takes out after everybody…cause he thinks everybody he hear comin’ is Matt Bonner comin’ tuh work ‘im on uh empty stomach” (53). Part of the fun of the game is that Matt gets so flustered each and every time, continually defending himself against the accusations, in a huff finally leaving the crowd that has gathered. It does not usually work: “But that never halted the mule talk. There would be more stories about how poor the brute was; his age; his evil disposition and his latest caper. Everybody indulged in mule talk. He was next to the Mayor in prominence, and made better talking” (53). They continually harped on it, picked, and teased. It was a game.

Importantly, the mule is just as much a member of the community as any human being there. He is finally freed from his labors when Joe agrees to purchase him from Matt for five
dollars in order to set him free (Hurston 57). When the exchange takes place, the town becomes much freer as well because the stories about the mule’s personality flourish. They all tell about

How he pushed open Lindsay’s kitchen door and slept in the place one night and fought until they made coffee for his breakfast; how he stuck his head in the Pearson’s window while the family was at the table and Mrs. Pearson mistook him for Rev. Pearson and handed him a plate; he ran Mrs. Tully off of the croquet ground for having such an ugly shape; he ran and caught up with Becky Anderson on the way to Maitland so as to keep his head out of the sun under her umbrella; he got tired of listening to Redmond’s long-winded prayer, and went inside the Baptist church and broke up the meeting. He did everything but let himself be bridled and visit Matt Bonner. (59)

All this type of mule-talk is important to the town because it provides a safe way to speak of someone’s faults—constructive criticism. It lets someone finally say the little things about someone else that silently annoy everybody. Letting things out in the open keeps the town united. They learn to laugh at each other through the mule and “his free-mule doings” (59). It is healthy for them because they do not have to keep anything bottled up. It unites the community. They share joy in the mule—their favorite game. As so much of their ritual is built around the mule-talk, when the animal dies, his legend continues. Hurston writes “Lum found him under the big tree on his rawbony back with all four feet up in the air. That wasn’t natural and it didn’t look right, but Sam said it would have been more unnatural for him to have laid down on his side and died like any other beast” (59). He was no average mule. There is a loss in the town when they lose the mule. His funeral is a celebration—“the dragging-out” (59). However, his spirit remains: “The yaller mule was gone from the town except for the porch talk, and for the children visiting his bleaching bones now and then in the sprit of adventure” (62). Clearly the talk lives on for generations. In this way, for Hurston, the animal tale of African American oral tradition continues indefinitely in America.
Janie’s Work as Family, Self, and Community

When Zora Neale Hurston figures the idea of work and laboring into Their Eyes Were Watching God, she relates much to the animal kingdom. As the type of labor changes and as the person changes (in this case, Janie), the animal metaphor changes as well. Critic Deborah Plant recognizes Janie’s changing journey as an independent one. Accordingly, Janie is in search of herself, and her “quiet self introspection” eventually brings her “divinity” (118). Her personal empowerment becomes her self-awareness (116). However, I suggest that Janie’s experiences are not only about the self. Janie’s search for herself is not a journey she takes alone. Instead, her changes are the direct result of her marriage experiences. Therefore, Janie’s movement in the novel is not a search she initiates on her own and continues on her own, but it is one in which nature guides her and leads her to community. Living close to nature (shown in the changing animal imagery Hurston uses) allows Janie to realize herself through her work and realize the new and different animal she becomes in each stage of her life. More specifically, each husband and the corresponding animal imagery represent Janie’s growing awareness of her family, herself, and her community.

Physical labor and work animals represent Janie’s quasi-arranged marriage to her first husband, Logan Killicks, through whom she develops a recognition of her heritage and the meaning of family. As the flashback to Janie’s past begins, she is already learning much of her tradition from her grandmother. A former slave, Nanny tells Janie as forewarning, “Ah didn’t want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-sow and Ah didn’t want mah daughter used dat way neither” (Hurston 16), but slave women did not have a choice. Nanny’s misfortune is felt here in her description. Her position equaled that of a common beast of burden, laboring in the fields and forced to have children who could only grow up to do the same. Under the institution of slavery,
Nanny perceived “de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out...[and] de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see” (14). And as this was the only way she knew, Nanny had different hopes for her own daughter, but when Janie is finally entrusted to her care, she knows the previous cycle must change. Nanny feels Janie’s only hope is love—or at least a solid marriage. Enter Logan Killicks. As Nanny tries to convince Janie that her only option is to marry Logan, she fills her in about the family’s past and her own worries about Janie, “‘Tain’t Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it’s protection” (15). She continues “Ah don’t want yo’ feathers always crumpled by folks throwin’ up things in yo’ face” (20). Despite Janie’s arguments (“his toe-nails look lak mule feet” [24], she protests, unknowingly about to find herself closely connected to the work mule) she recognizes her responsibilities to her grandmother and marries Logan. Their marriage, however, is simply one of convenience: for Nanny to ease her worries in her old age and for Logan to have someone help him work his farm.

On this localized farm, Logan and Janie’s home, Janie is underestimated. Logan feels he needs two mules to work with, one for himself and one “all gentled up so even uh woman kin handle ‘im” (Hurston 27). Logan feels Janie has “been spoilt rotten” as she does not work as intensely as he or apparently his first wife did (26). Janie tells him “You don’t take nothin’ to count but sow-belly and cornbread” (30); his work and what it can do for him is all that matters to him—certainly not love for her. Janie is ready to move on because “She knew things that nobody had ever told her” (25). Janie’s instincts are maturing. Nanny grounded Janie correctly, and physical labor has changed her thoughts from her earlier longing to simply experience teenage lust to knowing she needs a better life and deserves love. Janie married Logan out of
respect for Nanny and stayed with him as long as Nanny lived. However, Janie’s course of seeking herself and her desires naturally leads her to Joe (sometimes “Jody”) Starks who claims he wants to protect her from the inevitable, from the world and from work. When they meet, Janie tells Joe “Mah husband is gone tuh buy a mule fuh me tuh plow. He left me cuttin’ up seed p’taters” (29). He responds immediately with “You behind a plow! You ain’t got no mo’ business wid uh plow than a hog is got wid uh holiday!” (29). Interestingly, Joe adds, “Janie, if you think Ah aims to tole you off and make a dog outa you, youse wrong. Ah wants to make a wife outa you” (29). And he does make her a very pretty trophy wife. As Janie is maturing, discovering her own sexuality, she is spending time in nature with the birds and the bees, but her realization is framed in a more sophisticated manner: “She knew the world was a stallion rolling in the blue pasture of ether” (25). Joe Starks becomes her stallion as he is her fantasy and her escape from Logan.

Though Hurston introduces Joe as Janie’s stallion, he soon becomes a dangerous alligator, and as she matures from a work mule to a bell-cow, Janie’s work shifts from physical labor to a servile position at the Eatonville store. During her time in Eatonville, Janie’s self-instinct continues to thrive from when she left Logan, but here she ultimately discovers herself as independent and capable, though throughout their marriage Joe keeps her at a distance. He does not respect or appreciate her as a woman but sees her as below him. Though he claimed he had no intention to make a dog out of her, he comments later, “Somebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows” (Hurston 71). Janie runs the store that Joe sets up in the growing town. And just as Joe built the store, Janie rebuilds her life from Logan. When the store becomes the heart of the town, Janie realizes that she “must look on herself as the bell-cow, the other women were the gang” (41). Even if Joe does not see her as the strong woman she is, the
other townspeople—male and female—do. She is becoming the model citizen; the townspeople admire her for her work in the store. She is always near the center of everything that goes on. When Tony Taylor nominates Joe for mayor, he designates Janie “de light uh [Joe’s] home…. She couldn’t look no mo’ better and no nobler if she wuz de queen uh England. It’s a pledger fuh her tuh be heah amongst us” (42). However, the town’s recognition of Janie’s attributes brings out Joe’s jealousy. In fact he eventually forces her to hide her beauty; he makes her dress down and cover her hair. Joe is trying to keep her tied to him as one might treat an animal, but Janie will not remain in this position for long.

Because Joe keeps Janie below him, their marriage cannot last because Janie realizes the situation puts her out of tune with nature. She confesses to Jody, “it jus’ looks lake it keeps us in some way we ain’t natural wid one ‘nother. You’se always off talkin’ and fixin’ things, and Ah feels lak Ah’m jus’ markin’ time. Hope it soon gits over” (Hurston 46). She knows she is meant for more. As Janie continues to let herself roll along with the changes in life, Joe stagnates and then regresses. In fact, animals even become used as his action verbs, as “something about Joe Starks…cowed the town” (47). Hurston continues “It was bad enough for white people, but when one of your own color could be so different it put you on a wonder. It was like seeing your sister turn into a ‘gator. A familiar strangeness. You keep seeing your sister in the ‘gator and the ‘gator in your sister, and you’d rather not” (48).” Joe becomes a metaphor of a dangerous animal, but Hurston contrasts this same likeness to an even more dangerous type of human character. Joe tends to think of himself as not only better than Janie but better than the rest of the town. And the familiar strangeness that Janie recognizes comes from her being so close to nature, even the dangerous elements. It may not be comfortable, but it is the wisest choice. Janie’s desire is to live close to what she realizes is natural. In Eatonville, Janie garners a sense of the idea of
community, but because of Joe and his condescending attitude, she sees one way that community is not supposed to be; however, she does learn a great deal about herself.

With an abundance of animal imagery, Joe’s death releases Janie from the hold he has on her. Hurston indicates that Joe “gave a deep-growling sound like a hog dying down in the swamp and trying to drive off disturbance” (85), and “A deep sob came out of Jody’s weak frame. It was like beating a bass drum in a hen-house” (86). His release of animal noises releases her from his overprotection. Though the store has aged her (a friend tells her “You ain’t no young pullet no mo’. You’se uh ole hen now” [77]), Janie realizes that she no longer has to be “whipped like a cur dog” (89). She may be older mentally as well as physically, but she still has her looks, and her sense of self has been refined. As she unknowingly moves toward the real love she finds in Tea Cake, Janie fends off suitors, “She felt like slapping some of them for sitting around grinning at her like a pack of chessy cats, trying to make out they looked like love” (90) and telling her friend “They’s jes lak uh pack uh hawgs, when dey see uh full trough” (91). But these descriptions from Janie give her authority. She is no longer the bell-cow. She is the one using the animal language. She begins the rebuilding process in her life again after Joe. Though she may have been first among the other women, she cannot remain below a man. Fortunately for Janie, she does not have to. Janie set out from Nanny looking for love. Now she is even more open to nature and its guidance; she still pursues change in herself. Soon Tea Cake comes along, and she chooses him of her own accord.

With Tea Cake, Janie’s type of work shifts again, and this time she becomes an equal field hand with him in the Everglades, and their relationship and the corresponding animal references reveal Hurston’s ideas of community. In Eatonville, Janie realized who she was. Then she found the love she always wanted in Tea Cake, her “lil boy rooster” (Hurston 121). He is not
a laboring animal; he is not a dangerous animal. In fact, “God knows, Tea Cake wouldn’t harm a
fly” (126). If fact, if anything, Janie intimidates Tea Cake. She is so independent and confident in
herself (as she deserves to be) that she learns how to handle a gun and hunt. And at this she is
quite talented; “she could shoot a hawk out of a pine tree and not tear him up. Shoot his head
off” (131). In hunting, Janie takes on a role that stereotypically is held by men. Tea Cake wants
an equal partnership with Janie but is intimidated by her independence. At first, he hides his
“commonness” (124), from her when he goes out alone to spend time with his friends, gamble,
and be rowdy. It is Janie who insists on their equality, speaking up for herself. From then on, she
works beside him as a picker in the bean fields. I see that Janie’s equaling herself with Tea Cake
opens up the idea of the larger community in the novel.

The Everglades town, or the “muck” (Hurston 128), is a close-knit community. Like
Janie and her experiences with her three husbands, living there was like experiencing “three
lifetimes in one. Blues made and used right on the spot. Dancing, fighting, singing, crying,
laughing, winning and losing love every hour. Work all day for money, fight all night for love.
The rich black earth clinging to bodies and biting the skin like ants” (131). The characters are not
slaves. They are migrant workers, and it is profitable seasonal work they choose to do. They live
off the land, and they work like the animals too, “like a horse grinding sugar cane” (118). They
work of their own accord, earning their own wages to do with as they desire, “every man’s wish”
(1). Their work is on the land, not dominating it like Logan’s farm but working with it. They
have their hands in the dirt. They are as physically close to nature as can be. Whether for right or
wrong, their world is equal with the animals, and in the muck Janie learns the often unfair ways
of the world, “Anyone who looked more white folkish than herself was better than she was in her
criteria, therefore, it was right that they should be cruel to her at times, just as she was cruel to
those more negroid than herself in direct ratio to their negroness. Like the pecking-order in a chicken yard” (144). Janie is learning to follow the unwritten rules of the community. In all ways, though, the community remains close.

The larger picture that can be drawn from Janie’s work is that of the self and a self-made nation. America is rooted in work. The tradition of work that comes from slavery is deep and intense, but there is also the rebuilding that took place during Reconstruction and in the movement towards the twentieth century. Janie continually rebuilds her life. It makes her stronger. Hurston’s animals are also strong; she uses animals as work metaphors to reflect all these concepts. Here the concept of work becomes part of the nation’s roots—new beginnings, stronger foundations. We work. That is what we do. Though there are certainly exceptions, “everybody” has to have a job. Importantly, women work now when they did not in the public sphere before; in this way, Janie is a precursor to the modern woman because she chooses to work. Moreover, modern America is not old when compared to other nations, and the nation was built up from vast wilderness. There are echoes of physical labor in the development of America as a country (for example in the work of civilizing and building roads and houses, etc.). Now so much is urban, or even simply not-pastoral, what Jennifer Mason refers to as the “built environment” (1). But what has the building up destroyed of nature—of flora and fauna and of the natural existence? I see Hurston’s work as a reminder of a natural life or a life lived completely in nature rather than only in moments of it. It develops a sense of the self by keeping one in tune. Between friends and family, community allows each to find his or her place. There are hierarchies that are in place that will be challenged and will eventually change, but the idea is to change together. And a strong community is one that respects nature together, and as the rest of this essay will show, nature can be life saving.
The Wisdom of Animal Instinct

_Their Eyes Were Watching God_ openly illustrates the importance of a human’s living a life in tune with nature and continually honing animal-like instincts. This, Hurston affirms, is the way to survive in the world. Humans must have a respect for nature and its power, as well as animals and their value, for only then can we truly respect ourselves because we are not the only creatures on this planet. We are not kings to trample and rape the natural world. Without our environment, we cannot exist and losing sight of this fundamental reality is dangerous. To illustrate this truth, Zora Neale Hurston uses animals as role models to show why a deep connection to nature is important. First she shows the value in maintaining a respectful caution of the wildness of animals though Janie’s grandmother’s understanding of the inherent dangers in her world. Secondly, Hurston exhibits the power of nature’s forces and shows the life-saving wisdom that comes from instinct when the animals know to flee the Everglades storm, ultimately proving wiser than the humans.

Respect for nature first takes the form of fear and caution. Natural dangers are understood and, thus, appropriately dealt with in the novel, best exemplified by Janie’s grandmother, Nanny. Interestingly, Nanny also shows the reader that as dangerous as animals can be to humans, what humans have the power to do to each other proves worse. Nanny tells Janie of her escape from slavery. After the landowner’s wife discovered her husband’s affair with Nanny, Nanny made the decision to run from the plantation with Janie’s mother who was still a baby. She recalls for Janie, “In de black dark Ah wrapped mah baby de best Ah knowed how and made it to de swamp by de river. Ah knowed de place was full uh moccasins and other bitin’ snakes, but Ah was more skeered uh whut was behind me” (Hurston 18). This simple statement clearly shows
that the brutality of slavery was worse than even a deadly snakebite. Nanny was willing to take her chances. Her fear of the swamp came from her awareness of and respect for nature, and this respect empowered her. She knew the dangers, and that knowledge kept her from becoming careless. Had she not left the plantation, she would have been beaten (certainly near to death if she was not killed outright) and the baby would have been sold. Nanny knew what was out there in the water, in the dark. She made a calculated choice to run away, and it worked. She escaped. She was not bitten. She was not captured. And because she knew the land, she was not running blindly. The importance of this scene is made stronger when the generation gap is considered. Janie’s grandmother had no hesitation. She did not have to be prodded to escape her dire situation. She knew the dangers that surrounded her. In contrast to Nanny’s understanding of her world is Janie’s generation and its apathy towards the approaching storm in the Everglades years later.

Being in tune with nature becomes a matter of survival, as Hurston shows when the hurricane comes to the muck, and the results are devastating for those who take their focus off nature and put their faith in less important things. Critic Jan Cooper has assessed the Everglades community in Their Eyes as having achieved “something as close to the agrarian ideal as a modern Southern writer could imagine, a community in which all members have a well-defined role and are fundamentally at harmony with the luxuriant natural world surrounding them” (qtd. in Bone 765). However, Martyn Bone points out Cooper’s utter lack of acknowledgment of the hurricane in her argument (765). I agree. The hurricane’s physical damage (not to mention the painfully high death toll) clearly shows how disharmonious some of the local’s mental relationships to nature actually were. Bone explains Hurston’s real life model for the novel’s storm:
On 16 September 1928, a hurricane with winds of 140 miles per hour struck Florida. Upon reaching the southcentral part of the state, the wind demolished the feeble four-foot dikes that held back the 700 square miles of Lake Okeechobee, sending eight-foot tidal waves sweeping through the surrounding landscape. The official death toll was 1,838, but this figure has been disputed by scholars who believe that up to 6,000 people died and that “four-fifths of them [were] poor blacks working the fertile sugar cane and bean fields....” (767)

After the storm, the novel briefly addresses the great number of dead bodies and the problems that arose because of so few places for burial. Hurston then shifts the focus of the novel to Janie and Tea Cake’s final struggle with his sickness. However, what so strikingly remains unspoken is what none of the town needed to hear; they all silently understood. As after any major natural disaster, then as now, some return and some stay away. In this case, those that did return—humans as well as animals—no doubt made those who stayed to suffer the most destruction and death realize how ridiculous it was to remain in the first place. They had all been given every warning.

The first major warning of the severity of the approaching storm came from the animals, whose instincts clearly told them to find higher ground. The text that Hurston uses to describe the animals’ evacuation is lengthy on purpose. This is not a mere suggestion to the humans but what should have been an unmistakable indication to follow:

Some rabbits scurried through the quarters going east. Some possums slunk by and their route was definite. One or two at a time, then more. By the time the people left the fields the procession was constant. Snakes, rattlesnakes began to cross the quarters. The men killed a few, but they could not be missed from the crawling horde.... Several times during the night Janie heard the snort of big animals like deer. Once the muted voice of a panther. Going east and east. That night the palm and banana trees began that long distance talk with rain. Several people took fright and picked up and went in to Palm Beach anyway. A thousand buzzards held a flying meet and then went above the clouds and stayed. (Hurston 154-155)

The instincts of the animals are sharper than the humans. A “horde” of snakes leaves, but only “several people” follow. Most of the town gathers on porches, hoping for the best, but those who
leave do so for one of two reasons. They either have instincts so ingrained in nature that they realize as much as the animals do about the danger, or seeing the animals triggers the instinct that has not been too far repressed. By choosing to let nature serve as a guide (whether consciously or unconsciously), these people are spared. Hurston then stresses the unfortunate plight of those who are not, those who put their faith in humanity and civilization.

A second warning arrived from the Indians. Their presence in the novel marks the separation of man and beast; they are human but often considered uncivilized. But as they are close to nature, they are instinctual about the storm; they evacuate and survive:

a band of Seminoles pass[ed] by. The men walking in front and the laden, stolid women following them like burros....

Everybody was talking about it that night. But nobody was worried.... The next day more Indians moved east, unhurried but steady. Still a blue sky and fair weather. Beans running fine and prices good, so the Indians could be, must be, wrong. You couldn’t have a hurricane when you’re making seven and eight dollars a day picking beans. Indians are dumb anyhow, always were…. (Hurston 154-155)

Tea Cake’s response to the movement of the Indians is interesting in that he makes a comment when he had remained silent about the animals. Tea Cake says, “Indians don’t know much uh nothin’, tuh tell de truth. Else dey’d own dis country still. De white folks ain’t gone nowhere. Dey oughta know if it’s dangerous” (156). Tea Cake positions himself here above the Indians. At this moment, he trusts the white man. Most of the town agreed, and “the majority sat around laughing and waiting for the sun to get friendly again” (156). Brian Roberts has suggested that Hurston uses Indians in this scene to show just how much like the white man the black man is (43). Yet as this hierarchy builds in the novel, I suggest that it is not to show racial divisions. Humans divide and classify themselves this way. When divisions become the social structure, they become the very thing that separates humans from the animals and keeps mankind from connecting to that basic life instinct. This organizing causes chaos for all humanity, not just
certain races. The Indians are not to link the black man with the white man; they are there to show that it is possible for the human—regardless of race—to stay in touch with nature.

Though the choice is simple—respect nature and maintain a life-saving instinct, or ignore nature and face destruction—Tea Cake remains convinced the wealthy people in town know what is best. “De crow gahn up” a friend warns him. Tea Cake replies, “Dat ain’t nothin’. You ain’t seen de bossman go up, is yuh…? Tain’t nothin’ but uh lil blow” (Hurston 156). Tea Cake’s denial about the approaching storm and the need to evacuate is interesting here because he puts his faith in other people who have what is apparently his ultimate goal, money. Hurston translates Tea Cake’s thoughts: “If the castles thought themselves secure, the cabins needn’t worry” (158). He is waiting for the money to indicate that the time has come to leave. Others take comfort in this as well. However, Tea Cake’s instinct finally kicks in when he notices fish floundering in the front yard (160). He realizes it is time to evacuate. The storm has pushed Tea Cake to his limit of human trust. He cannot wait on the rich to lead any longer. He ignored the animals when they left originally, but he trusts them now. He trusts himself again. With this, Hurston indicates that when face to face with the forces of nature, human divisions of class simply do not matter.

At the height of the storm, all people are equal because the storm does not have any preference: “Wind and rain beating on old folks and beating on babies” (Hurston 164). As Janie and Tea Cake evacuate, “They passed a dead man in a sitting position on a hammock, entirely surrounded by wild animals and snakes. Common danger made common friends. Nothing sought a conquest over the other” (164); life was too important. When a man finds himself trapped by a rattlesnake, Tea Cake astutely points out “‘De snake won’t bite yuh’…. ‘He skeered tuh go intuh uh coil. Skeered he’ll be blowed away. Step round dat side and swim off’” (164-165). Tea Cake
is now fully realizing what he instinctively knew all along. Humans do not have to be so far removed from the animals. If we do not recognize it in our conscious minds, we must realize we can and should. Hurston’s storm demonstrates that civilization is sometimes too civilized for its own good. And as if Hurston cries “Wake up!” to humanity so content to ignore the natural world, her characters develop a type of narcolepsy during their escape. As Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat run from the lake, they find a “tall house” and crawl upstairs to sleep; however, the next day, as Janie and Tea Cake continue on their way, Motor Boat resists, insisting “Ah’m safe here, man. Go ahead if yuh wants to. Ah’m sleepy” (163). Just as he stays to rest, others all long the road are lying down. Tea Cake too, finally, gives in (165). It appears Hurston is punishing them with this sleeping spell; the water will catch up. Had they been aware beforehand, they could have all made it out in time. Instead they denied and resisted. For many, it is too late. Those who ultimately ignored nature are left to fend for themselves in the storm.

Conclusion

Animal imagery abounds in Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God. Brian Roberts points out that this comes as no surprise because of Hurston’s extensive background of folklore studies and her appreciation for the African American animal tale tradition (40). However, because animal imagery in Their Eyes is so common—it is seen, or heard, continuously in both Hurston’s own narration and the voices of the characters—its purpose can become easy to overlook. The first page of the novel tells us that “Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins,” and over the course of the novel, they occupy the reader as well. Animals come on subtly, but they are everywhere. The key is that Hurston’s writing contains more than just a few intense moments of nature and fauna. Animals permeate the work, and I suggest that
Hurston did this on purpose. The design I see in her work is a stressing of the importance of living a life completely immersed in nature. Instead of just taking part in big moments here and there and from time to time, *Their Eyes* demonstrates the benefits of a life that embraces nature, both the good and the bad. Nature brings understanding of history, heritage, and the self, but it also holds the power of immense destruction. All of nature is represented in the novel (weather, animals, flora, Hemenway’s “organic metaphors”), but this essay focuses on animals specifically because, as living, feeling, mobile beings, they can be so representative of humanity. Hurston’s work shows us what we can stand to learn from animals and the importance of respecting them and all of nature. The novel brings the realization that we are not living in a different world from the animals; we are all here together. And when the storm comes, they know to leave. Therefore, I see *Their Eyes* as a call for remembrance of a time when harmony with nature was not so foreign and far away. With modern civilization comes our modern instincts, but modern often takes on the meaning of being further from nature. We are animals too, and as Hurston’s work shows, staying in tune with our natural instincts proves to be the wisest move.
Chapter Notes

1 See Brian R. Roberts, “Predators in the ‘Glades: A Signifying Animal Tale in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God,” Southern Quarterly 41 (2002): 39-50. Roberts suggests that the cultural discourses Hurston wrote in response to included, first, “men who had seemingly rejected African American folkways to climb to an equal footing with white society…black males' seeming betrayal of black culture for white social status” (40), and, second, “white America’s classification of predators” (41), situated as “the Weak, played by helpless animals…and white women; the Predator, played by such beings as wolves, foxes, hawks, and black men; and the Hyper-Predator, played nearly exclusively by white men, who kill the Predator to show chivalry and mercy toward the weak, ultimately distinguishing themselves as heroes” (42). Roberts argues Hurston addressed these issues in the form of the African American signifying tale, disguising them as a covert animal fable.

2 See Deborah G. Plant, “‘Coming Out More Than Conquer’: Spirituality, Empowerment, Freedom, and Peace,” Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography of the Spirit (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007) 83-131. Plant argues “Janie would learn that what she sought was not outside herself” and that Hurston “integrates self-knowledge and consciousness as key components of the individual and collective journey inward and onward to the horizon—to one’s destiny” (109, 116). See also Nellie McKay, “‘Crayon Enlargements of Life’: Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God as Autobiography,” New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990) 51-70. McKay suggests that Janie “take[s] us on a journey of personal discovery to the place where language, gender, and culture merge to give full voice to the otherwise often-marginalized black female self” (54). As McKay goes on to discuss the role of community in the novel, she focuses strictly on the racial community.
CHAPTER III


Mark Twain’s overt fascination with animals as natural and simple yet wise beings is striking, and he uses them as either main or secondary characters in most of his work. Critics have examined Twain’s use of animal imagery, specifically that of his birds, describing them as “imaginative extensions” of Twain, equalized to “the perfect image of [him]…rowdy, always noisy…always chafing, scolding, scoffing, laughing, ripping and cursing” (Arnold 37). However, I suggest that Twain uses animals in his writing for more than just this autobiographical connection that makes animals equal to humans. In fact, I see Twain’s animals as designed to contrast humans: he writes of animal virtues in order to highlight humanity’s vices. I have garnered this reading from one of Twain’s later essays in which he writes “it obliges me to renounce my allegiance to the Darwinian theory of the Ascent of Man from the Lower Animals; since it now seems plain to me that that theory ought to be vacated in favor of a new and truer one, this new and truer one to be named the Descent of Man from the Higher Animals” (“Man’s Place” 81). In this later essay, Twain is famously more scathing towards humanity and in favor of the animal world because, as he grew older, he recognized a pattern of destructive human actions towards other people as well as the environment. My essay then analyzes Twain’s well-known comparison of humanity and the animals in light of several of his earlier animal sketches and suggests that instead of addressing humanity at large, Twain’s animals are a specific denunciation of Americanized attitudes. Twain’s writing, like his travels, crisscrossed all areas of the county, and because of this, Twain became something of a regional
writer for many different regions of the U. S. Moreover, he considered himself “not an American” but “the American” (qtd. in Fishkin 8); he felt his voice of experience could speak for all of the country’s different groups. Shelley Fisher Fishkin recognizes in general that Twain has “indelibly shaped our view of who and what the United States is as a nation and who and what we might become. He helped define the rhythms of our prose and the contours of our moral map. He saw our best and our worst, our extravagant promise and our stunning failures, our comic foibles, and our tragic flaws…” allowing Americans to “recognize their own insularity, boorishness, arrogance or ignorance and laugh at it (7-8). Specifically I suggest that Twain, in the voice of “the American,” uses animal figurations to speak to the U. S. in the fable tradition. In so doing, he provides instruction for how to embody the same beneficial qualities as the animal kingdom. In particular, this essay examines Twain’s promotion of a selfless, un-raced, and mobile country.

That Twain’s high regard for animals is seen in their use as a mirror of the human condition is not a new idea, yet Jennifer Mason ranks Twain among “a wide range of authors typically excluded from studies of literature and nature [who] were actively participating in contemporary debates about humans’ connection to the nonhuman world” (25). However, Mason only suggests and never defines Twain’s specific connection. As such, I see Twain’s emphasis on animal imagery as a call for American society to avoid action that undermines the nation’s espoused rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These qualities we hold for ourselves seem to exist only in theory. Interestingly, the animals demonstrate how these ideas can be put into action. The animals, then, provide a type of moral guidance in that they demonstrate what humans should do, maybe even want to do, but are not doing. The negative attitudes Twain criticizes are those that consider man a superior being to animals (when intellect
is valued over instinct), when a nation seemingly dedicated to equality and freedom denies its own citizens those very privileges, and when humans become so complacent that they refuse to find new areas of the world and life to explore. Through his fable-like lessons, in order to show the ideals Twain held for America (his definition of the inalienable rights), Twain’s animals in “The Stolen White Elephant,” Roughing It, and Pudd’nhead Wilson are mentally unhindered by vanity, wealth, or a false sense of wisdom that comes from a sole reliance on the human mind over instinct; are socially undivided by race; and are physically freed to live a broad, well-traveled experience.

Vital to my reading of Twain’s animals merits in his early writing is one of his later essays, “Man’s Place in the Animal World” (or “Man’s Place”), written in 1896 as a reaction against harmful trends he recognized in the world: in the year 1572, “it was Christian against Christian. The Roman Catholics…sprung a surprise upon the unprepared and unsuspecting protestants, and butchered them by thousands—both sexes and all ages…. At Rome the Pope and the Church gave public thanks to God when the happy news came” (80). Twain goes on to write “Hypocrisy, envy, malice, cruelty, vengefulness, seduction, rape, robbery, swindling, arson, bigamy, adultery, and the oppression and humiliation of the poor and helpless in all ways, have been and still are more or less common among both the civilized and uncivilized peoples of the earth” (80), and, ultimately, these very misdeeds are the ones Twain’s essay proceeds to compare unfavorably to the noble doings of the animal kingdom. However, according to John Tuckey, Twain critics tend to dismiss his “later writings [due to a] lack of significance because their author had lost his belief in the dignity of man and the value of human life” (532). But even though “Man’s Place” is more bitter and lacking in hope for humankind than much of his earlier work, Mark Twain exhibited the same respect and admiration for animals as well as the same
disdain for human faults throughout his career—even though these ideas are projected earlier in more celebrated terms and with satiric humor. In fact, I find Twain’s indictment of man’s superior attitude towards nature and his fellow humans and his complacency to remain attached to his “comfort zone” in life imperative to the reading of “The Stolen White Elephant,” *Roughing It,* and *Pudd’nhead Wilson* as fable lessons that show the benefits of an existence in tune with the natural world. Twain’s concept that man has descended from the animals rather than risen above is a theme he believed all along, and when read together, they all prove Twain’s same point: animals can show us our ideals and our faults; as they rage against selfish desires for wealth, fame, and human wisdom; racism; and immobility (the pieces of the “pie” the animals do not wish for), they reflect Twain’s version of the ideal American mind.

Mark Twain’s writing serves as a lesson for how to live up to his ideals of a united nation, and he accomplishes this by styling his critiques in the form of the animal fable. Arnold notes that Twain “owed much to the plantation humor of the Black oral tradition of deep Southern slave folklore” (34). Specifically I see Twain’s work as following Joel Chandler Harris’s “Uncle Remus” in the fable tradition of using animals in order to make a profession of morals. Early American fables descended from the European version and were “of a didactic nature, intent upon shaping puritanical ideas while teaching the youth their letters” (Lancaster 99). Lancaster adds, “Harris’ old plantation Aesop possessed an appreciation both for nature and for human nature,” and notably, “The animal fable did not desist with Uncle Remus and his generation in America. If anything, Harris’ success stimulated the publication of a host of other imaginative animal tales for children” (105, 112). Harris makes sense as Twain’s literary predecessor because he popularized animals as lessons for children and adults and kept readers wanting more. Important here is the fact I am not placing my reading of Twain’s animals in the
category of children’s literature. Twain does not write of animals in an overly sentimental fashion; instead, he uses his animals in satirical contrast to human nature and models them as representatives of the good humanity is inherently capable of yet generally disregards. Twain uses animals as metaphorical ambassadors to humanity. In all ways, the animals appear more civilized than the human when their actions (and non-actions) highlight the animalistic qualities in the human. The irony, then, is that the actions of the animalistic human are worse than those of the animals themselves. Twain’s metaphors point out that the flaws that humans tend to deny in our characters and our culture. Specifically, by following the fable tradition in animal literature, in much the same way that Zora Neale Hurston’s work represents a historical aspect of African American roots in oral storytelling through her characters’ ingrained connections with animals, the selections I have chosen of Twain’s continue in what I consider a more modern atmosphere—the written over the oral, the sketch or “reported event” (Wonham 26), over the tall tale. Instead of Hurston’s mule-talkers as a picture of the past, Twain uses animals to narrate the changes in America during the turn of the century and the move toward the American attitude that seeks individual advancement at all costs. This essay analyzes two distinct sets of Twain’s animals. First his exotic creatures (that they are not native to America indicates the money required to see them) discredit narrow, self-serving motives such as greed, materialism, fame, and selfish vanity that some spare no expense to attain. Second Twain’s canines (important to America culture at a time when pet ownership became trendy [Mason 12]) both highlight the racial inequality that continued long after the end of the Civil War and promote freedom in self-discovery and travel. It is through these animal sketches constructed as fables that I see Twain’s insistence that humans live lives in harmony with nature by taking cues from the animals.
I begin with an analysis of two of Twain’s exotic animals. First, in the short story “The Stolen White Elephant,” Twain places an escaped pachyderm that seeks only its own survival in direct contrast to a manipulative human antagonist to show how civilization’s self-serving motives are destructive. I then discuss a second exotic, this one a camel, as a critique of humanity’s reliance on institutional, “human” wisdom rather than natural instinct. To Twain, it was the power of the mind that served as the determining factor for true freedom in life (Horn 85). In other words, the ability to think for oneself and act accordingly was paramount and exemplified by not getting caught up in the lures of the man-made environment or more specifically the American-made one. I suggest Twain showed a questioning of man’s ability to achieve this personal freedom of the mind by critiquing the phenomenon of the American quest for ever-increasing personal wealth and fame. Twain’s animals do not pursue American consumerism, materialism, or progress at the cost of cutting each other’s throats but stand out because they avoid these human traps. As Jason Horn notes, Twain’s human characters often became entangled in “the snags of soft determinism, negating the ultimate assertion of personal independence” (56). Human nature may desire this independence but human limitations cannot be denied. Twain’s animals, however, seem to be above the “snags” of determinism because, I suggest, they are part of the natural environment—or what has become completely external to the human because of the rapid spread of technology that makes the natural world less familiar to the human experience. Here the importance of exotic animals in Twain’s work becomes clear; because they are non-native to the U. S., animals like elephants and camels can only be seen in certain environments (e.g. zoos, travel, safaris), experiences made possible by disposable income. Twain’s exotic animals, then, are hinting at not only a broader cosmopolitanism of
ideas, but as they are un-Americanized, they are the promoters of true freedom of thought, therefore, of life.

A second group of animals I am analyzing is Twain’s canines. To further discuss Twain’s perceptions of the American ideal, this essay calls upon his well-known stance against racial inequality, especially in the years that made up the era of Reconstruction when slavery had ended and racial divisions remained, weakening any chance of a socially unified country. Fishkin notes how “Twain’s condemnation of racism in the 1880s was not news to scholars, who had long been familiar with his private, unpublished jibes at it from the 1870s on. Nor was it news to careful readers of Huckleberry Finn, who grasped the antiracist thrust of the book’s satire.” (106). As I will show, this “antiracist thrust” continues in the 1894 novella Pudd’nhead Wilson. Specifically, this essay dissects Twain’s use of a verbal construction of a dog as an unraced being in order to denounce not only the former institution of slavery but the nation’s persistent racial inequalities or the denying of equal opportunities of life to an entire populace. As a new arrival in a small southern town, David Wilson hears an annoying bark from a dog and snidely remarks that he would like to own half the dog. When questioned why by anonymous townspeople, Wilson remarks that it is so he could kill his half. Astounded at his statement, the town declares Wilson a dope as it remains completely oblivious to his indication of their denial of complete equal rights and liberties to their fellow man.

Like his half-a-dog joke, another dog serves as a reflection of Twain’s American ideals. In this case, the town-dog in the novel Roughing It becomes Twain’s sense of freedom, first shown as physical mobility from place to place and then as the pursuit of individual desire. Twain wrote in the midst of the Gilded Age of the latter half of the nineteenth century (“1865-1890…the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the age of money” [Zheng 1]) that saw a
swell not only in industrialization, technology, and population but also in the gap between the rich and the poor. For many, taking advantage of opportunities for personal advancement equaled greater wealth, and people accumulated physical belongings, things generally no more important than to be regarded as “stuff.” Zheng identifies this time period as one of “speculation, competition, and the pursuit of fashions” (5); inevitability, packrat Americans felt themselves tied to place as a result of the phenomenon of accumulation, and I see Twain’s writing as a critique of this “gilded” attitude. In this way, for some, the process of relocation itself became greater work and a sense of complacency with the status quo emerged; attachment to physical locality grew strong, and people stayed put. Importantly, Twain did not feel that Americans should resist all physical belongings and attachments. In fact, he maintained a great appreciation of and respect for technological advances and gadgetry, seen in his “love of magnificence” and “pecuniary interest in the inventions of others” (Howells 7, 79). However, as Fishkin recognizes, he “fear[ed] the potential for dehumanization and devastations that technology offered…. But coupled with this fear was a concomitant openness to the intriguing liberating possibilities that existed alongside the potential for disaster. Twain never lost his excitement about the changes just around the bend” (180). I suggest then that Twain uses his nature writing to explore the potential dangers of technology and materialism. I also want to note that at the same time he encourages a continual search for new experiences and expansion of the personal identity beyond the familiar and localized life. I see Twain as an advocate for Americans to lighten the load. To do this, in the novel Roughing It, Twain moves West, encouraging the revival of Manifest Destiny in the late 19th century or the progress of movement rather than stagnation. Clearly an advocate of travel, Twain continuously moved throughout the U. S. and abroad, yet though he never forgot his hometown of Hannibal, Missouri—“real only as his mind chose to recall it, yet
there, in some sense, in actuality, to return to in body as well as in spirit” (Fishkin 14)—he did not have to remain there forever. In his writing I see encouragement for Americans to do the same: travel, see the nation, and resist becoming weighed down by unimportant things. As Twain never blindly accepted technology and change, neither do his animals. His view, then, is one of following desire while maintaining a sense of responsibility, personal growth, and change, demonstrated in the mobility of Roughing It’s town-dog that freely follows his desires to pursue a coyote and discovers his own inability to catch it. The town-dog displays a remarkable change: when he fails, he is morose and full of self-pity but finally reaches acceptance. This is Twain’s version of freedom of the mind: discover abilities, push boundaries, but learn from mistakes; follow the natural course and move on to different avenues rather than blindly continuing to pursue what just does not work. The animals in Twain’s writing serve as examples of how and why to live in touch with nature. To him, the idea of being in harmony with nature leads to an understanding of the self and thus a collectively more aware nation.

Twain’s Exotics

In Twain’s short story “The Stolen White Elephant,” an unnamed narrator is in charge of presenting a royal white elephant as a gift from the King of Siam to the Queen of England. The elephant, Hassan, is unmistakable because of his size and shockingly white color, yet on the way to England, he is stolen and apparently lost in New York City. The narrator contacts the police and begins working with one Inspector Blunt, a man more concerned with having his name in the papers than doing his job. Blunt immediately begins the motions of arranging a search, sending out idiotic detectives and opening a private correspondence with the press, exaggerating to the public about the “dangerous” animal at large but assuring them that the situation is under his
control. Blunt’s detectives follow any and every sign of the elephant (always just common things like holes for a farmer’s sapling trees they mistake for tracks [Twain, “Elephant” 21] or simply a “dim vast mass” [29]) and destroy everything in their path while blaming it on Hassan. The search drags on for weeks because if Blunt solves the case, he can no longer be a hero for providing protection. The story is absurd yet subtly satirizes Blunt’s self-serving attitude. I see this story as an illustration of humanity’s self-serving, destructive attitudes. The importance of this comparison—an innocent elephant in direct opposition to a human antagonist—is fully underscored in the essay “Man’s Place in the Animal World,” where Twain suggests

Man is the Reasoning Animal. Such is the claim. I think it is open to dispute. Indeed, my experiments have proven to me that he is the Unreasoning Animal…. His record is the fantastic record of the maniac. I consider that the strongest count against his intelligence is the fact that…he blandly sets himself up as the head animal of the lot; whereas by his own standards he is the bottom one. (85)

In this light, Inspector Blunt becomes the supreme figure of Twain’s “Unreasoning Animal.” Inspector Blunt, as a self-serving public officer, is a sketch of a common man with dangerous ambitions; he has no concern for any creature beyond himself and unscrupulously seeks his own gain. The ridiculousness of the story’s action—an elephant, and a solid white one no less, is at large in the city yet somehow remains evasive and becomes “the proverbial needle in the haystack” (Messent 68)—only illuminates the potential gravity of man’s blind ambitions. Instead of seeking out the thieves, recovering the elephant, or protecting the public, Blunt’s only focus is the advancement of his name; “[T]his is magnificent!,” he exclaims, “This is the greatest windfall that any detective organization ever had. The fame of it will travel to the ends of the earth, and endure to the end of time, and my name with it” (Twain, “Elephant” 28). With this statement, his ulterior motives are made clear. Blunt is the fiend of the story, though he would have the reader think the real troublemaker is the animal. I see Blunt as representing a self-
serving humanity distinguished from Twain’s animals that do not seek advancement beyond the basic necessities of life or manipulate others in order to rise higher. Instead they accept their places in the world. Twain’s animals contrast man’s unreasoning nature and the inevitable damage that comes from seeking personal gain at all costs. Animals do not feel a sense of entitlement that, in humans, results in needless destruction and false wisdom. Twain saw value in the simplicity of nature. Man, it seems, takes himself too seriously, and Twain illuminates this as a fault. Taking the natural course in life, by this story, is to take an example from the elephant and not the Inspector.

To note, Blunt’s operating procedures seem illogical and futile. However, should he solve the case, his name would no longer be printed daily in the papers. Following this line of reasoning, he demonstrates an ineptitude that goes unnoticed by the story’s other characters. For example, Blunt queries the narrator as if it were a missing person’s case, then proceeds to shift his technique to that required for a robbery, a move “mutually inconsistent” and completely inappropriate for this case (Messent 69). Eventually Blunt asks the narrator to describe the elephant’s eating habits—how else to ensure the capture? However, this move does nothing but humanize the elephant and highlight Twain’s vilification of Blunt: the narrator explains that though the elephant may not necessarily have a palate as sensitive as a human’s, he knows what he likes:

He will leave Bibles to eat bricks, he will leave bricks to eat bottles, he will leave bottles to eat clothing, he will leave clothing to eat cats, he will leave cats to eat oysters, he will leave oysters to eat ham, he will leave ham to eat sugar, he will leave sugar to eat pie, he will leave pie to eat potatoes…There is nothing whatever that he will not eat but European butter…He will drink anything that is fluid, except European coffee. (“Elephant” 14)

The lightheartedness of Twain’s description of the innocent elephant contrasts the deeds of the devious Blunt.
Blunt’s motives are so selfish he has no concern for those he hurts, just those who think he helps. In a most perplexing move, Blunt advertises for the surrender of the criminals. Printed in the newspaper is a secret code: “A.—xwblv. 242 N. Tjnd—fz328wmlg. Ozpo,--; 2 m! ogw. Mum,” he explains, is an understood call “to the usual rendezvous. …a place where all business affairs between detectives and criminals were conducted (Twain, “Elephant” 32). As incongruous as this cryptic code appears, the message satisfies the masses. They do not see Blunt’s ploy to gain respect and fame. Important here as well is the fact that Blunt does not care about the means by which he achieves his ends. Twain’s lesson, then, is aimed at those who have placed their faith in Blunt: the narrator and the public masses. Not only does Twain suggest the destruction that arises out of a mad pursuit of wealth and fame but also the fatuity of those who admire and never question the wealthy and famous. No one dares question Blunt’s role as leader; not even when his communication is gibberish do they consider anything but his hard work and noble devotion to the cause. The masses have become illogical cohorts by accepting Blunt’s actions, and with such unchecked power, destruction is inevitable.

As noted earlier, Twain’s animals are not self-serving but only interested in their survival. In this case, Hassan is an innocent animal idiotically pursued through an urban environment for three weeks. He is merely reacting to the situation into which he has been forced, yet as a trail of destruction follows him, the elephant receives all blame: Hassan “[moves upon his fatal march! Whole villages deserted by their fright-stricken occupants! Pale terror goes before him, death and devastation follow after! After these, the detectives!” the newspapers howl, “Barns destroyed, factories gutted, harvests devoured, public assemblages dispersed, accompanied by scenes of carnage impossible to describe!” (Twain, “Elephant” 27). No one stops to consider that the elephant’s destruction comes inadvertently from his size in his search
for survival or that, in fact, much of the destruction actually derives from the bumbling detectives in his wake. Twain emphasizes Hassan is not hurting anyone or anything deliberately (he is just running scared), in direct contrast to Inspector Blunt’s seeking of personal gain. Though his self-justification and blind ambition ultimately result in the death of the elephant, Blunt’s value as hero increases, as does his paycheck. Destruction and death are then celebrated, and the reader is left to consider the implications of a real life spent in hot pursuit of money and fame or in admiration of those who do the pursuing. To what means is humanity willing to go to achieve these ends?

To answer this question, I draw specifically on “Man’s Place” and Twain’s fable-like narrative of buffalo hunters’ entertaining an English aristocrat. He explains that he witnessed the killing of 72 animals for sport and the eating of most of one for dinner. To parallel this atrocity, Twain tells of a zoological experiment: “In order to determine the difference between an anaconda and an earl—if any—I caused seven young calves to be turned into the anaconda’s cage. The grateful reptile immediately crushed one of them and swallowed it, then lay back satisfied. It showed no further interest in the calves, and no disposition to harm them.” He concludes “The fact stood proven that the difference between an earl and an anaconda is, that the earl is cruel and the anaconda isn’t; and that the earl wantonly destroys what he has no use for, but the anaconda doesn’t” (“Man’s Place” 82). Twain’s idea that man is overly destructive and lacking in reason and self-awareness is shown in direct proportion to his examples of animals and their implicit understanding and acceptance of the world around them. But, I note, it is not about class. The fable is not chastising the rich earl for being rich but instead all those who blindly and recklessly destroy the environment and their fellowman in the hunt for riches and fame. In contrast are the animals. Animals fulfill their needs and call it a day. In this construction
of needless death and destruction from unchecked power and ambition, Twain critiques the quest for individual ends that disregard means as well as the advancement of any one part over the good of the whole.

The second half of my analysis of Mark Twain’s exotic beasts in the fable tradition addresses humanity’s unreasoning inventions of the mind. Twain’s 1872 novel *Roughing It* comically portrays a same idea he acerbically expresses later in the text “Man’s Place”: “Indecency, vulgarity, [and] obscenity…are strictly confined to man; he invented them. Among the higher animals there is no trace of them” (83). Moreover, in the same *Roughing It* scene, Twain criticizes the man-made institution he himself knew the most intimately: the power of language to express human wisdom, here fashioned specifically as journalism.

The unnamed narrator of *Roughing It* tells of his misadventures with a Syrian camel whose humanized thought process is striking in that, like the elephant, the camel’s perceptions resemble the preferences of the human race. The reader meets the camel as he is discovering the narrator’s overcoat and examining it critically “as if he had an idea of getting one made like it”; as he proceeds to devour the jacket, the camel’s smile exudes satisfaction for “it was plain to see he regarded [the velvet collar] as the daintiest thing about an overcoat” (Twain, *Roughing It* 35-36). Though fictionalized—Twain’s license for much of his humor—the author aligns humanity and nature through the construction of preference, yet at the same time, draws attention to their differences with the animal’s unexpected use for the coat. To the camel, the human requirement of clothing is nothing more than a snack.

Again, a return to “Man’s Place” provides additional insight into this scene. Twain asserts “[Animals] hide nothing; they are not ashamed. Man, with his soiled mind, covers himself. …so alive is he and his mates to indecent suggestion” (“Man’s Place” 83). First, man is
the only animal to conceal himself with clothing for fear of exposure to other humans—other animals, it seems, pay no mind. To Twain, the sense of “[i]ndecency, vulgarity, [and] obscenity” that is lacking in the camel’s psyche sets the animal kingdom on a higher plane. Animals do not feel the need to hide their bodies behind clothes, so the camel’s unfamiliarity with the coat as an article of clothing signifies a purer mind than that possessed by a human obsessed with his or her own sexuality. As well, the idea of possession continues. Twain’s setup of the camel’s lunch demonstrates his idea that mankind and members of the animal kingdom can appreciate the same basic elements of life but in different ways. The absurdity of an overcoat’s very presence in the Syrian desert (a signal of the narrator’s blatant over-packing), then, represents the degree to which humans over-value material objects. We always want what we do not need. And then we want more of it.

The judgment that Twain makes through the camel’s appetite is unrelenting in the second course, though it would be the animal’s last. As he proceeds to eat the narrator’s journalism manuscripts, “He began to come across solid wisdom in those documents that was rather weighty on his stomach…. He began to gag and gasp, and his eyes to stand out, and his forelegs to spread, and in about a quarter of a minute he fell over as stiff as a carpenter’s work-bench, and died a death of indescribable agony” (Twain, Roughing It 36). Though the narrator insists the piece was “one of the mildest and gentlest statements of fact that I ever laid before a trusting public” (36), clearly something is amiss. What the narrator considers “solid wisdom” (36), I suggest is instead an indication of how far below the animals the status of humanity and its “wisdom” really is. Though the beast could “take a joke,” the narrator’s journalistic wisdom acts as a poison “not even a camel could swallow” (36). The things that the camel could not handle—human interpretations of life or intellect over instinct, not to mention bias and deception in the
media—are things humans swallow everyday. And the severity of the camel’s death comes to light when accompanied by a remark on the appetite of a camel (again uniting the camel with the white elephant, both martyrs for the merits of animals in light of humanity) from one of Twain’s earlier works. In The Innocents Abroad, Twain notes of camels:

They are not particular about their diet. They would eat a tombstone if they could bite it. A thistle grows about here which has needles on it that would pierce through leather, I think; if one touches you, you can find relief in nothing but profanity. The camels eat these. They show by their actions that they enjoy them. I suppose it would be a real treat to a camel to have a keg of nails for supper. (439)

Tombstones, bristly thistles and nails rank higher than humanity’s words and wisdom. In the same way that humans hide behind clothing, according to Twain’s camel, so we hide behind words. Humans tend to think of themselves as superior to the animals. We have our acclaimed institutions. They do not. We use our institutions, and the things we create there, as an excuse to justify our superiority. The animals exist much more simply than we do. But, like the elephant, the camel’s death is inevitable. These animals do not require or even want what humanity needs. They live a simpler life in tune with nature, a concept Twain respected and admired. In fact, Howard Horwitz astutely identifies that in Huckleberry Finn Twain’s “communion with nature” is inherently “independent of institutional practice” (245); it seems this idea continues to flow through much of Twain’s work. Moreover, that Twain himself was a journalist in his early years underscores the importance of his later work. The publication of “Man’s Place” positions it later than Twain’s fables of the exotic, clearly demonstrating both his increasing doubts of the civilized and an insistence on the purer life of the uncivilized, a position that never wavered during his career. This construction of the elephant and the camel, then, show the potential damage and destruction of overvaluing humanity’s institutions—fame, wealth, and our civilized version of wisdom. The very things that make us civilized are the very things that keep us
attacking each other and the environment. Humans are not happy with a little; we want a lot. We cannot be content to be superior in our advanced thought processes and engineering; we must destroy nature and our fellow man in order to continuously prove it. This is wise to us. We claim we want to live in a unified nation, yet we only keep ourselves from it with constant competition and destruction. I see here Twain’s use of exotic animals as retaliation against these negatives in society, in “this nation, so wrapped in commerce and so little used to honor among its many thieves” (Howells 55). Twain respected the instincts of the natural world and its ultimate freedom in life from all the entanglements of man. He desired for all Americans to do the same.

Twain’s Canines

In one of Twain’s more veiled animal references, the reader is connected to one of humanity’s worst deviations. In fact, the severity of the situation to Twain is marked by the seemingly lightweight anecdote. In his 1894 novel Pudd’nhead Wilson, Twain critiques Southern antebellum slave culture with what, on the surface, appears to be no more than a joke. The protagonist, David Wilson, a lawyer who “had just made the acquaintance of a group of citizens when an invisible dog began to yelp and snarl and howl and make himself very comprehensively disagreeable, whereupon young Wilson said, much as one who is thinking aloud,

‘I wish I owned half of that dog.’

‘Why?’ somebody asked.

‘Because I would kill my half”’ (Twain, Pudd’nhead Wilson 24).

This dialogue’s power heightens when taken into account along with the fact that Twain spoke out against slavery in many of his works (most notably Adventures of Huckleberry Finn), often more obviously than the half-a-dog incident. Barbara Ladd notes that Pudd’nhead Wilson “is
constructed upon the divisions in American political and cultural life in the post-Civil War period. [Critics] have discussed the import of growing racism and black disfranchisement to the text, underscoring Mark Twain’s continuing concern with racial divisions in the United States. And race is, without doubt, at the very center of the text” (115-116). However, Ladd goes on to dismiss David Wilson’s character for his “growing complicity with the slaveholding system”; she argues that Wilson remains “apparently ‘untouched’” (110), and faults him for “not bring[ing] a murderer to justice” even though his courtroom fingerprinting “scheme” reveals the truth to the townspeople (111). However, as I see it, the effectiveness of Wilson’s character is, in fact, this seeming aloofness to southern racial issues. In the same way that the North won the war but could not halt racial disparities that continued to abound, Wilson, as a northerner in the South, has no authority to openly criticize southern society. In fact, I suggest Twain intentionally formulated Wilson’s role as subversive. He does not bring the true murderer to justice as he is neither the judge nor the jury. Instead, Wilson’s comment serves to show the truth behind how white, elitist Southerners were treating their fellow humans, but the town of Dawson’s Landing still does not see. It is through Twain’s construction of an unraced animal as a joke that Wilson highlights the ridiculousness of America’s Southern situation—a country priding itself on notions of freedom and equality while denying the very same to an entire population of African Americans.

Specifically, the townspeople’s utter shock and repulsion at David Wilson’s joke of wanting to own half of a dog indicates their inability to see clearly how they treat their fellow man. After Wilson’s initial expression of his intentions with his half, “The group searched his face with curiosity, with anxiety even, but found no light there, no expression that they could read” (Twain, Pudd’nhead Wilson 24). And because they could not understand, they had to label
Wilson and mark him as different. That they did not get the joke speaks volumes. To Mark
Twain, they should have been fully aware of the ways and means of southern societal
institutions. According to Twain’s longtime friend William Dean Howells, Twain “held himself
responsible for the wrong which the white race had done the black race in slavery” (35), and I
see Wilson’s radical joke as a means of calling attention to the ignorance of those who failed to
make the connection. To note, according to historian Albert F. Simpson, the famous Three-Fifths
Compromise marked the southern slave as

an important element in the political affairs of the nation. Indeed, it is doubtful whether
any single factor was of greater significance in the field of politics, from 1787 through
1821, than was the three-fifths ratio with its strong influence in the formative stages of
the struggle between the North and South. …slave representation was a powerful, if not
actually the most powerful, force in the growth of a vigorous antisouthern and antislavery
sentiment. (315)

The idea that the free man counted as a whole person and a slave as only three-fifths was no
secret. Therefore, Wilson did not need to wish he owned three-fifths of the dog. The joke was
meant to be underhanded and subtle. It was meant to guilt the townspeople into acknowledging
their behavior. Because representation of towns in the U. S. was built upon this sordid three-
fifths “fact,” the townspeople of Dawson’s Landing would have been fully aware of the politics
of 1830—the date Twain states once and reiterates again before expressing Wilson’s joke
(Pudd’nhead Wilson 17, 22). Though a small town, it could boast of an ideal locale along the
Mississippi, another idea Twain spends the first pages of the book describing. National news,
including politics, would have made its way into town on a regular basis. Dawson’s Landing was
in no way isolated from the nation at large. The idea of repulsion at half of a dog and no reaction
whatsoever to three-fifths of a man indicates the soullessness of Twain’s characters, an attribute
he associated with slaveholding.
Moreover, Twain’s naming of his townspeople to whom the joke is directed is telling. Not only do the citizens reveal the absurdity of owning half of a living creature to the reader and remain oblivious to their own actions, but Twain himself never finds the occasion to name these general “citizens” (Pudd’nhead Wilson 24), the very term denied to the African American. Twain refers to his six citizens as “somebody,” “one,” “another,” and “a third” (24); as their argument with Wilson carries on, numbers take over as their identifying marks (“No. 3,” “No. 4,” “No. 5,” etc. [25-26]). There is no need to name these characters; they are so alike that no distinguishing differences exist. In fact, earlier in the same chapter, Twain sketches the ideal white Southern citizen in his sardonic portrait of York Leicester Driscoll: “He was very proud of his old Virginian ancestry…in his hospitalities and his rather formal and stately manners he kept up its traditions. He was fine and just and generous.” He was, above all, “a gentlemen without stain or blemish…respected, esteemed, and beloved” (20-21), in Dawson’s Landing, “a slaveholding town…sleepy and comfortable and contented” (20). From this sarcastic description, I see Twain’s lack of naming the arguing citizens as an indication they are reproductions of the prototype that is the “chief citizen” (20) Driscoll.

In that the six citizens could never dissect Pudd’nhead Wilson’s joke, Wilson’s dog becomes Twain’s subversive critique of Southern slave owning culture and its denial of equal liberties to members of the black race. Then, not only does Twain denounce a region of the country so important to his work, but an alignment of this sketch with “Man’s Place” shifts his focus to a larger critique of American society. Twain’s consciousness is marked by his fascination, and even relief, with the fact that animals do not have the will to harm humans out of spite, anger, revenge, or convenience. In “Man’s Place,” Twain writes “Man is the only Slave. And he is the only animal who enslaves. He has always been a slave in one form or another, and
has always held other slaves in bondage under him in one way or another…The higher animals are the only ones who exclusively do their own work and provide their own living” (84). Twain utilizes this fact in making his subversive joke. Animals do not enslave each other. They live peaceably with the exception of killing as survival requires. Twain writes “Of all the animals, man is the only that is cruel. He is the only one that inflicts pain for the pleasure of doing it. It is a trait that is not known to the higher animals. The cat plays with the frightened mouse; but she has this excuse, that she does not know that the mouse is suffering. The cat is moderate—unhumanly moderate” (84). And it is the “unhuman” ability to avoid inflicting intentional suffering upon others and the fact that they remain unraced beings that allow Twain’s animals to be such accurate gauges for civilized society as their qualities prove superior to the lowliness of the human being.

Though he felt animals were more civilized than humans, Twain did not entirely give up on the human race. If C. Webster Wheelock is correct in pointing out that “Wilson’s half-dog becomes a stern test of Southern attitudes” (151), then Dawson’s Landing’s six citizens have clearly failed. However, in a positive indication of future rethinking, Twain presents the idea that the “contented” attitude of the city’s slaveholding did not continue indefinitely; he writes that Wilson’s nickname “held its place…for twenty long years” (Pudd’nhead Wilson 26). Again, Twain’s indication that the narrative takes place in 1830 is important—twenty years later is still eleven years from the start of the Civil War, and the hope Twain gives is that, fortunately, Dawson’s Landing (like much of the South) was changing for the better, “very slowly, in fact, but still it was growing” (20). “Pudd’nhead” and the ignorance of those who could not understand the joke held “place for twenty long years,” not thirty-one. Twain’s unraced dog—he only needed half to make his point—represents an unmet ideal of American society as racial
disparities continued long after the Civil War came to an end. That Twain wanted Americans to understand their injustices towards each other through *Pudd’nhead Wilson* becomes evident when aligned with his later work. A clear denunciation of humanity’s misjudgments is spelled out in “Man’s Place” in no uncertain terms. The key, then, to Mark Twain’s writing is in the alignment of these two texts.

The last of Twain’s animal constructions this essay examines is yet another portrait from *Roughing It*—Twain’s town-dog on the American frontier. Much like its human counterparts have the capacity to be, Twain’s town-dog is cocky, educated and determined; he is a “dog that has a good opinion of himself, and has been brought up to think he knows something about speed” (*Roughing It* 50). To test this theory, Twain vividly describes a western coyote, then sends his town-dog on an impossible chase. Though the coyote remains out of reach, the dog initially feels “encouragement and worldly ambition...[lays] his head still lower to the ground, and [stretches] his neck further to the front, and [pants] more fiercely, and [sticks] his tail out straighter behind, and [moves] his furious legs with a yet wilder frenzy” (50). Psychologically, the dog, at first, is unaware of its own limits but yet would never learn them without this necessary test, much like the human. As the coyote maintains its faster speed, the dog becomes confused, unable to “understand why it is that he cannot get perceptibly closer,” and clear human-like emotions set in, first frustration, then anger (50-51). Interestingly, in the midst of this agitation, the dog demonstrates a cognizance that something is wrong and “…grows still more and more incensed to see how shamefully he has been taken in by an entire stranger, and what an ignoble swindle that long, calm, soft-footed trot [of the coyote] is” (50). In a human-like last-ditch effort, the dog gets a second wind, but in a dizzying moment is left farther behind than ever as the coyote seemingly vanishes into the distance. The dog, then, returns home dejected. He
pouts, he whines, and he moans. He “takes up a humble position under the hindmost wagon, and feels unspeakably mean, and looks ashamed, and hangs his tail at half-mast for a week” (51). Just like us.

Interestingly, when read as part of Twain’s fable tradition, the importance of the town-dog’s chase reveals two human shortcomings in American culture: an unappreciation of the value of freedom in mobility and the lack of learning about or understanding the self. Strikingly, the dog’s character rises over that of a human’s as his resolve is put to another test. Twain writes “whenever there is a great hue and cry after a cayote, that dog will merely glance in that direction without emotion, and apparently observe to himself, ‘I believe I do not wish any of the pie’” (Roughing It 51), a significant remark for it shows that when the dog is once again able to think clearly, he is wiser for the experience. He knows better; he will not chase a coyote again. Even when tempted, even when he hears the call, though the reader can sense the animal’s hesitation, his mere “glance,” he turns away. Unlike humans, the dog does not need to lose the same battle again. He knows the coyote will still outrun him. He has caught on to the game, an understanding Twain asserts human nature resists: “In truth, man is incurably foolish. Simple things which the other animals easily learn, he is incapable of learning” (“Man’s Place” 85). The dog has learned something of his own nature. It may have not been an easy lesson, but it is one he will not forget. Instead of holding a grudge, the dog moves on with his life, an idea Twain wanted humanity to embrace.

Arguably, one could say the dog is simply stubborn, that he lost once and may never try again. Perhaps when Twain writes “For as much as a year after that…” (Roughing It 51)—indicating the length of time the dog outright ignores the coyote—the text suggests that after a year has passed, the dog returns to his coyote-chasing ways. Similarly, Forrest G. Robinson
conjectures that the town-dog “does not acquire wisdom and knowledge from his painful experience. He acquires precisely what the coyote wants him to acquire: a powerful insight into the cruel consequences of trusting appearances, and a shattering revelation of his own vanity and capacity for self-deception. The dog is not educated or initiated; he is utterly crushed” (50). Yet, regardless of the degree of the initial pain the realization wrought, I note that the dog clearly does lose his illusions. How is the development of “powerful insight” and “shattering revelation[s]” not wisdom? The dog comes to understand that his failure to catch the coyote is not from a lack of heart or effort on his part; the coyote is simply too fast for him. The dog learns—and ultimately accepts—his place in nature. It is this knowledge, moreover, that Twain uses to separate the town-dog’s efforts from those of humanity. The animal does not make any attempt to cheat and manipulate the odds or waste time and energy fighting them. The chase was never a matter of survival; the dog never hunted the coyote for food, so with no need to kill the other animal, it is simply for love of the chase that the dog followed in the first place. And once he realizes the true state of affairs, the dog lets the situation go, a lesson from which humanity could profit.

According to Twain’s animal constructions, only after learning and understanding are rooted in the psyche can true human freedom take effect. Jason Horn writes that Twain’s “major works speak for his own choice of freedom as the core condition of human thought and action. Freedom in this sense would be a self-determining process that not only shaped the fate of human progress in the world but actually created the world through which we progress” (85). As post-Civil War literature, Twain’s writing echoes the resurgence of the idea of Manifest Destiny in late nineteenth-century America. Geographically, Roughing It moves away from the Southern slave history and Mississippi storytelling to the American frontier—instead of a boat confined to
the banks of the river, the town-dog is given unlimited access to the space of the prairies.

Psychologically, Manifest Destiny and the idea of the frontier were meant to save America from its racially divided past (LeMenager 189-190), yet in reality “it was in California and Nevada, where Twain lived from the outbreak of the Civil War until 1867, that he seems first to have noticed modern racism and linked it to the United States’ unique brand of empire” (191), which helps explain Horn’s indication that “Human will, fate, and choice are still the central issues” in other works, and, notably, “Twain presents all three as factors controlled by social context rather than by individual effort. Thus while Twain would continue to champion independent thought and its creative action in the world, ironically his faith in human freedom would never in itself be free of lingering doubt” (151). Horn is correct, and my focus, then, centers on this concept of humanity’s inability to deal with freedom. As Twain’s writing shows, it takes an animal to fully represent freedom’s ideals. In the movement from the South to the West, Twain unbinds his animal from a reliance on physical location as a definition of identity—to be a Southerner by definition does not require permanent residency in the South. Nor does being an American require any local affiliation. In this way, the town-dog represents escape from social constraints and puts identity back into the hands of the individual. Moreover, the town-dog shows the mental benefits of a personal freedom as well as the physical. In the movement West and his high-speed chase across the desert, the dog pursues his individual wants yet serves as a reminder that the freedom to pursue desire comes the responsibility of learning and not falsely assuming a privileged status that places everything within grasp. Humanity’s conceptions of “human will, fate, and choice” become constraining with no learning, and Twain’s animals, again, step up as the ideal.
I want to further draw attention to the way Twain argues in favor of the ability to learn the true self and find freedom, a position that places the animal over the human. He credits the human race with “one stupendous superiority” (“Man’s Place 89): intellect. The caveat, though, is man’s tendency to ignore it. In “Man’s Place,” Twain writes “It is curious, it is noteworthy, that no heaven has even been offered him wherein his one sole superiority was provided with a chance to enjoy itself. Even when he himself has imagined a heaven, he has never made provision in it for intellectual joys…. And it is full of grim suggestion: that we are not as important, perhaps, as we had all along supposed we were” (89). As I see it, Twain’s assertion suggests that if man’s intelligence is so unimportant in an idealized heaven, so it is in an imperfect world. To illustrate this learning, then, Twain provides an example of learned peace. “In an hour,” he claims, “I taught a cat and a dog to be friends. I put them in a cage. In another hour I taught them to be friends with a rabbit. In the course of two days I was able to add a fox, a goose, a squirrel and some doves. Finally a monkey. They lived together in peace; even affectionately” (85). In an immediate contrast, he writes of another experiment that bound together men of all nations and religions for forty-eight hours. He describes “When I came back to note results, the cage of Higher Animals was all right, but in the other there was but a chaos of gory odds and ends of turbans and fezzes and plaids and bones and flesh—not a specimen left alive” (86). Learning to peacefully coexist is a lesson humanity has long avoided. Twain, therefore, admired this quality in the beasts, and demonstrated the learning capacity of animals in Roughing It’s town-dog. In this image of the canine, Twain marks a division between humanity and the uncivilized world, illuminating the superiority of the purer animal nature and his ideal American mind.
Conclusion

As Mark Twain matured and continued writing, his works did become visibly more caustic. He had seen the world and felt he knew his fellow man. At the same time, he studied animals during his travels—in zoos and in the wild—and he drew his own conclusions. When he wrote “Man’s Place in the Animal World” and compared the evils of civilized man to the virtues of the uncivilized animal kingdom, he presented his ideas in a caustic tone. However, though the style in which he wrote shifted with age and experience, Twain’s notions that animals are wiser, more realistic, more aware, less vindictive, and make better judges than humans never changed. As various animal portraits across Twain’s canon show, the author felt justified in placing his creatures on pedestals. Their noble characteristics, he argued, parallel the conspicuous absence of virtue in humans. Twain personified the animal world in his writing in order to show the errors of mankind. Through the selfless, unraced, and mobile creatures in his works, the concepts of “civilized” and “uncivilized” as adjectives describing humans and animals reversed. But as Twain’s idea about the place of man in the animals’ world is sobering, the humor that enveloped much of his work makes the lesson engaging and memorable. Notably, Twain did not anthropomorphize his animal characters to make his stories cute or to bait sentimental readers. In his literature, they served a very pointed purpose of addressing American culture and humanity. Though Twain’s hope for humanity grew darker, his insistence of the virtues of the animal world never wavered. It seems fitting then that Twain “had a wide ranging curiosity about animals” (Rodney and Brashear viii), in real life. His admiration of them extended to all aspects of his world. Jennifer Mason writes “Mark Twain speculated in his notebooks that admission to heaven must go ‘by favor.’ ‘If it went by merit,’ he reasoned, ‘you would stay out and your dog would
go in’” (129). It seems, then, that Twain might have trouble finding any animal that would not be welcome in his heaven.
Chapter Notes

1 See Robert M. Rodney and Minnie M. Brashear, *The Birds and Beasts of Mark Twain* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1966), for a survey of Twain’s works that contain animals, including, but not limited to, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Following the Equator*, *Roughing It*, *A Tramp Abroad*, *The Innocents Abroad*, his autobiography, and numerous other stories and letters.

2 See St. George Tucker Arnold, Jr., “Mark Twain’s Birds and Joel Chandler Harris’s Rabbit: Two Modes of Projection of Authorial Personality in Comic Critters,” *Thalia* 11 (1989): 34-41, where he discusses Twain’s addition to the tradition of Thomas Bangs Thorpe and Alexander McNutt by writing of animals biographically. Specifically, Twain’s birds “extended his self-image, his life, thoughts, and, most importantly, his sense of whimsy” (37). They play “the ‘refresher’ role…” in that “the bird buoys up Mark Twain, keeps him going, pleased with himself, with his life and his comedy” (38).

3 See Jennifer Mason, *Civilized Creatures: Urban Animals, Sentimental Culture, and American Literature, 1850-1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005) 26. Mason’s study critiques authors Susan Warner, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Charles W. Chesnutt. She mentions Twain, among others, as an author typically not studied for his nature writings as earlier authors had more famously staked that claim, including “mid-century nature lovers—James Fenimore Cooper, the transcendentalists, [and] the Hudson River painters,” and ultimately Thoreau and Cole: “virtually all…histories of America’s love affair with wild nature…treat Thoreau as representative of the self that America wanted to be and then slide from Thoreau in the 1850s to the conservation and other wilderness-oriented activities that did not gain a solid purchase in American culture until the turn of the century” (26).
4 This is Paul Baender’s editorial title from Twain’s untitled essay in *What is Man?*. Baender uses brackets to indicate his emendations: “[Man’s Place in the Animal World].” The same essay is entitled “The Lowest Animal” in Twain’s *Letters from the Earth* (editor Bernard DeVoto).

5 See Henry B. Wonham, *Mark Twain and the Art of the Tall Tale* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993). Wonham suggests Twain’s importance in the movement from oral transmissions of story to the written: “By 1850, several writers had learned that the tall tale names a form of social ritual as much as it names a style of narration, that to present a tall tale is to describe an interpretative game with important social consequences for its participants. It remained for late writers, such as Mark Twain, to enact that game in an even more unlikely setting by introducing the tall tale’s transactive rhetoric to the American novel” (50).

6 Fishkin. Considering Hannibal, MO, “Twain did return physically…celebrated as a conquering hero. As a writer, however, he returned…many more times. Hannibal would be the St. Petersburg of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and the sequels, and of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (where parts of it may have made their way into Bricksville and Pikesville as well). It would appear in the shape of Dawson’s Landing in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* and Eseldorf (literally ‘Assville’) in *The Mysterious Stranger*. It would peek out in various guises from the pages of *Life on the Mississippi*, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, ‘The Private History of a Campaign That Failed,’ and *Following the Equator*, as well as the autobiographical dictations and the posthumously published ‘Tom Sawyer’s Conspiracy’ and ‘A Scrap of Curious History.’ Dimensions of Hannibal’s complacency, pretentiousness, and bad faith would surface in ‘The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg’ and ‘My First Lie and How I Got Out of It’—a suggestive but incomplete list.” (14).
CHAPTER IV

AVOIDING THE “PRETTY SPECTACLE”: THE NATURE OF JACK LONDON AND BUCK’S STRENUOUS EVOLUTION IN THE CALL OF THE WILD

Jack London, an author in tune with nature, recognized an interconnectedness between man and animal. To London, a respect for and appreciation of both the animal kingdom and the environment is a necessity in life, as seen in his essay entitled “The Other Animals” when he writes to those who reject a life in accordance with nature, “though you stand on the top of the ladder of life, you must not kick out that ladder from under your feet. You must not deny your relatives, the other animals. Their history is your history, and if you kick them to the bottom of the abyss, to the bottom of the abyss you go yourself” (120). As one might imagine, London’s writing generally reflects his attitude toward nature; his dog stories especially serve as mirrors of the animal’s straightforward existence to the human’s overly structured environment. Specifically this essay looks at London’s The Call of the Wild as a demonstration of the author’s visions of nature and humanity. The plotline of the novel is familiar. It is the story of a dog reverting to the wild. However, London does not indicate that humans must revert to the wild in order to be in harmony with nature, as Charles Crow has argued. Crow suggests that both London and Buck embrace a “primitive sidekick” (48), or alter ego, in order to find connection with nature (for Buck it is his “wild [wolf] brother”; for London, the Indian [47]). However, instead of suggesting that all humans revert back to the primitive, London uses The Call of the Wild to encourage a positive human perspective on nature. Again, Buck, as a metaphor, is still a dog, and his positive actions counteract negative actions in humanity. Buck does not equal humanity but advocates the benefits of living with conscious regard of the environment and the individual characterization of the self. Precisely, I see in London’s work a call for deeper human
consideration of nature instead of manipulation. As London’s wolf-dog protagonist Buck learns to follow his natural instincts in the novel, the reader cheers him on, recognizing the importance of embracing nature that is reflected in Buck’s transformation: because nature provides the “ladder…under your feet,” acknowledging it is an acknowledgment of the true self. *The Call of the Wild*, then, shows that finding harmony with nature (respecting its power and allowing it to be a guide) brings a deeper awareness of the self and one’s human limitations when one allows the natural environment to provide a refuge from the hustle of manmade society. London advocated an alignment of nature and self as part of his ideal society rooted in an understanding of the natural world through the work of Charles Darwin. This essay shows *The Call of the Wild* as a fictionalized account of Darwinian evolution, though first I demonstrate that one of London’s inspirations for the novel was the political landscape of America at the turn of the century. I intend to show how President Theodore Roosevelt provided London with an example of how not to live in harmony with nature.

London’s social and political views were somewhat contradictory: he considered himself a Socialist but advocated the same brand of American imperialism as Theodore Roosevelt, though this is nearly all the two had in common. London, like Roosevelt, acknowledged the nation’s responsibility to spread out and conquer (Peluso 58). In this way, clearly, they both accepted the idea of Social Darwinism or the survival of the fittest among races and nations (this basic understanding of imperialism is reflected in *The Call of the Wild*’s movement north into the Klondike, past American borders). Humans are competitive beings, certainly, but the notion emerged that the white male, specifically the white male American, should reign supreme. Yet Roosevelt believed that the white male American had a duty to conquer any and all other forms of life—domestic minorities, foreign nations, all women, and animals (Bederman 172). Though
London supported the idea of humans in contest with each other, when it came to nature it was a different story. He rejected the idea of a conquering attitude towards nature and animals. In fact, I suggest that he rejected the overall negative attitude about the environment that was surfacing in America at the time under Roosevelt’s guidance. According to scholar Gail Bederman, Roosevelt advocated an initiative he called the “Strenuous Life” that became his thesis of cultured manliness and his call for American men to avoid “over-civilization”—the softening of self in the face of leisure (171). This goal of avoiding over-civilization required a condescending attitude towards nature and animals that situated the human as the prime, overall being, entitled to look down at nature. Roosevelt sought to prove that he and his nation would conquer anything and anyone simply because they could. Moreover, because Roosevelt felt the white male American must be number one (all else is below), he sketched himself in the pattern of his own ideal man. Seemingly overnight, Roosevelt falsified his persona to fit his political agenda of domination by making himself into an uber-masculine rancher-cowboy-hunter, seeking to demonstrate “the ultimate in civilized manly restraint and in primitive masculine prowess” (212), by, for example, killing “269 mammals during [a] safari” (211). Roosevelt encouraged American men follow his lead by becoming ranchers and cowboys themselves, throwing themselves untrained into the wilds of untamed America in the imperialistic spirit of dominance to prove masculinity. Strikingly, the impact of the Strenuous Life movement is seen in the fact that this identity he created stuck: Bederman notes, “Even today, historians invoke Roosevelt as the quintessential symbol of turn-of-the-century masculinity” (171). However, I want to point out that Roosevelt’s image of manliness was just that: an image. In fact, I interpret London’s work as a sign that the trend of manipulation of nature in order to prove virility is threatening. It is the
opposite of harmony with nature: a forgery of the self, and *The Call of the Wild* shows that this deceptive view of superiority can only lead to destruction of nature.

As this essay will show, when Gail Bederman’s assessment of the Strenuous Life facet of Roosevelt’s political career and image is aligned with London’s defense of nature in *The Call of the Wild*, I see a critique of the manly attitude portrayed by Roosevelt. London advocated an appreciation and respect for nature; in it he found an escape from the obsessions of Roosevelt’s ever-modernizing America. *The Call of the Wild* stands in direct opposition to the idea that the white male American stands in a ruling position over all other humans, animals, and nature. London’s purpose in *The Call of the Wild* then is to demonstrate the higher value of remaining close to nature, which in turn will provide a fuller—and truer—idea of the self. London achieves this by introducing the characters Hal, Charles, and Mercedes into the primitive landscape as a parody of the easy target Roosevelt made of himself in his posturing and as a denunciation of the Strenuous Life. When these three “tourists” decide to undertake a Klondike adventure untrained and unknowing, they bumble around in the environment until it overtakes them. These scenes parallel Roosevelt’s overnight transformation into his rancher-cowboy-hunter. To offset this reading, London has Buck genuinely revert to the wild, again not to suggest humans need to do this too but instead to demonstrate the animal’s fitting reversion as opposed to man’s pretending to get back to nature. Buck then becomes an example of Roosevelt’s avoidance of over-civilization, achieving what Roosevelt only advertises. He legitimately changes, unlike Roosevelt’s feigned persona and manipulated image. Buck allows nature its rightful ruling place, which ultimately grants him freedom. At the same time, London also uses *The Call of the Wild* to counteract Roosevelt’s capitalist motivations—the puppet strings of the “puppet thing” London calls life (*Call 23*)—because as Buck, so aptly named, progresses through the novel, his
value increases; however, through his embrace of the wild, Buck loses all dollar value, empowering London’s Socialist beliefs. In this way, Buck is London’s version of national progress. As he transforms physically and mentally, the animal reflects for humanity the legitimate course of positive progress rather than the creation of an image that simply looks better on the surface.

Interestingly, *The Call of the Wild* did draw Theodore Roosevelt’s attention but not for the particular scene I suggest London aimed at him. What Roosevelt did notice, however, was London’s configuration (or to Roosevelt, his mis-configuration) of Buck’s evolutionary transformation. In 1907, the president publicly criticized *The Call of the Wild* (as well as its sister novel *White Fang*), claiming certain incidents that indicated Buck’s awareness of his changes were a “gross falsifying of nature’s records” (qtd. in Walker, Reesman 108). Roosevelt, who considered himself a student of Darwin, claimed that all animals, excluding humans, function on instinct alone and are incapable of any form of reason. He insisted that anyone who spent any time in nature would have picked up some clue as to the true ways of animals (London, “Other Animals” 110), and ultimately named London a “nature-faker” (qtd. in Walker, Reesman 108). London took offense at the implication that he misunderstood nature and rightly so. By the time of *The Call of the Wild*’s publication in 1903 (itself three years before *White Fang*), London had already spent much of his life in the natural environment, sailed much of the world as well as returned from his own Klondike expedition (Labor, Leitz xxvii-xxviii). It was years before that, even, when London discovered Darwin, and all these experiences naturally coalesced in his writing. To make the issue clear, in “The Other Animals,” London writes, “I endeavored to make my stories in line with the facts of evolution” (109). He did. And I will use this essay to show how Darwinian evolution works in *The Call of the Wild*. 
In The Call of the Wild London figures Buck as a representation of the hard work survival and adaptation (or change) require. London embraced the idea of change in life, often referring to it as the “flux” of life (“Other Animals” 118). By this, London recognizes that as humans we can change and do, so we should not fight it or force it. Roosevelt’s image stood in direct contrast to this belief, so that when considered together, London’s novel exemplifies a sense of true change and improvement or forward progress in the form of Darwinian evolution and critiques Roosevelt’s belief in only the social evolution of the white male American, a view London calls utterly “homocentric” (110). London saw animals on the same plane of existence as humans, not in separate worlds as Roosevelt did. The division between the civilized and the uncivilized worlds is not so wide, he asserts. “Let us be very humble. We who are so very human are very animal” (120), he writes. He indicated to the President, “What you repudiate in them you repudiate in yourself—a pretty spectacle, truly, of an exalted animal striving to disown the stuff of life out of which it was made, striving by use of the very reason that was developed by evolution to deny the processes of evolution that developed it. This may be good egotism, but it is not good science. (120). Because of how highly London viewed animals, I see Buck as an ideal candidate for natural selection and evolution: he adapts. He faces competition. He thrives.

The Strenuous Life

A scene in The Call of the Wild shows the dangers of manipulating nature or pretending to be someone you are not meant to be. When Roosevelt accused Jack London of being a nature-faker, London suggested that “President Roosevelt does not understand evolution, and he does not seem to have made much of an attempt to understand evolution” (“Other Animals” 110). In the work London uses the nature of the animal to contrast the nature of the human. Interestingly,
I also see in London’s novel a key idea that nature must be allowed its rightful place in our world.

In Chapter 5 of The Call of the Wild, London introduces Hal, Charles, and Mercedes, the fourth owners of Buck’s team, an over-civilized trio of three inept beings who have responded to the puppet strings of society, the lure of the yellow metal (5), proving that capitalist incentives can overwhelm common sense. As soon as the group appears in the novella, it is clear that they are no more than tourists in the Klondike. They have no knowledge about Buck and his sled team, which they purchase “for a song,” as each dog’s physical prowess is drained from having driven 2,500 miles in less than half a year (46-47). However, the majority of this chapter is not about the animals per se (as if London gives them rest) but instead focuses on the tragicomedy of this inexperienced group. London’s descriptions of the three throughout the chapter are telling: that they are “lightish-colored…weak…[callow]…slipshod and slovenly…[disorderly and fluttery],” “dainty,” simple-minded, and “helpless” (47-48, 51, 54), proves they have no rightful business in the North. The climate is unforgiving, and the group is described as if they are over-civilized; they are unable to handle the rough conditions. They do not appear to have any signs of strength. Neither Hal, Charles, nor Mercedes has either trained physically or prepared mentally for the toil ahead. They are unaware of how to care for the dogs, and none knows how to successfully guide a sled. They over-pack and ignore advice to leave behind their tent and unwashed dishes to lighten the load for the animals: “‘Undreamed of!’ cried Mercedes, throwing up her hands in dainty dismay. ‘However in the world could I manage without a tent?’” (48). When they finally get on the move, the dogs somehow manage to pull the weight a short distance when the sled overturns, and Buck, “raging” (50), races the team through town. In a laughable scene, townspeople catch the animals and help retrieve the group’s scattered canned goods and
other vital necessities. During their pursuit of the gold, the team ignores the animals, ignores the weather, and bickers with each other until they drive themselves and all the dogs save Buck (John Thornton steps in to rescue him) to their deaths. A harsh ending, no doubt, but London’s point is clear. These people had no understanding of where they were going or what they were doing. As well, they never learn from their mistakes along the way. They put in no real effort and no real work. They were trying to trick nature, but no one was fooled. The importance of this reading is its striking similarity to the political persona of Theodore Roosevelt who manipulated his own image. Instead of truly changing anything about himself or allowing himself to be changed, Roosevelt assumed new identities. He never evolved, but he wanted everyone to think he had. Roosevelt then is the ultimate contrast to Buck, seen in Hal, Charles, and Mercedes’ lark into the wilderness: their blind quest for money parallels Roosevelt’s quest for political power.

London critiqued Roosevelt in The Call of the Wild because the president had unabashedly set out to prove his manliness by attempting to conquer nature, precisely the opposite of London’s ideals. Roosevelt certainly had an awareness of nature; however, to what extent is debatable. Historian Gail Bederman has indicated that at a young age, the sickly, effeminate Roosevelt immersed himself in his own version of nature from which he never surfaced. His childhood reading of Darwin’s The Origin of Species, as well as Mayne Reid’s The Boy Hunters (which portrays both a stereotypical version of the American western and the idea that the white man “is the fiercest most powerful animal of all” [Bederman 173]), combined with his father’s ideals of “strength, altruism, self-restraint…chastity [and] authority over the lower orders,” formed the “violent masculinity” (172), that Roosevelt saw represented in nature. He believed in the supremacy of the white race, asserting that Americans “retained all the superior racial traits of the older British race” (179). He disregarded all immigrants not from Europe and
denied all blacks the classification of “American” (179). He enacted his own version of survival of the fittest between Americans and the Indians, whom he felt were only “thrown together on one continent [to] compete to establish which race had the strongest, most powerful men” (180). Roosevelt had no doubt in the white man’s superiority and continually perpetrated the myth of white male American authority over women, non-whites, and animals. Roosevelt’s focus on manhood turned into an “imperialistic evolutionary struggle” (171), that he “believed…allowed the fittest species and races to survive, ultimately moving evolution forward toward its ultimate, civilized perfection” (174). However, Roosevelt’s way of doing this was skewed. He wanted violence and mayhem. He called on American men to support him. He had no training or experience in the endeavors he pursued, but he convinced many that he did.

Though they maintained similar ideas concerning imperialism, London and Roosevelt differed concerning nature, and this included the true nature of the self. The key aspect behind all of Roosevelt’s ambitions, and what I posit London ultimately criticizes in *The Call of the Wild*, is that Roosevelt only wanted political success. Gail Bederman attests that when Roosevelt took office in 1901, he had already managed to manipulate his public persona from an effeminate “Jane-Dandy” into the “quintessential symbol of turn-of-the-century masculinity” (170-171). The image he created for himself was just that: an image. He portrayed himself (comically, I might add), as the ultimate, rugged frontiersman, a controller of nature, “bold, resourceful and self-reliant” (Bederman 180). In an 1883 trip to Montana, Roosevelt transformed himself into the child from his adventure stories, “giddy with delight” at “shooting buffalo and bullying obstreperous cowboys” (175). Upon his return home, he advised the “gilded youth” of the nation to “go West and try a short course of riding bucking ponies, and assist at the branding of a lot of Texas steers” (175), in order to be as one with nature like himself. Roosevelt certainly dressed
the part; he was often photographed in the inappropriate attire of the Indian, “[sans] eyeglasses (which would mark his body as imperfectly evolved)” (176). Politically, he named the rancher and the western American frontier as the line of demarcation between civilization and the primitive (176). However, Bederman insists

Roosevelt’s ranchman identity was not…merely a case of cynical political packaging. It stemmed from Roosevelt’s understanding of the higher significance of his political leadership. Despite his single-minded quest for political power, TR never believed he craved power for its own sake. As he saw it, his political ambitions ultimately served the purposes—not of his own selfish personal advancement—but of the millennial mission to advance his race and nation toward a more perfect civilization. (177)

Instead, I argue that Roosevelt’s “understanding of the higher significance of his political leadership” was in fact a misunderstanding of his political power and a misuse of his political image as identity. Roosevelt justified his beliefs of imperialistic conquering with Darwin and the idea that man is the prime species. However, in trying to turn himself into this prime man, Roosevelt neglected any and all actual change.

In misunderstanding Darwin, Roosevelt never allowed himself the chance to evolve into a different kind of person; he merely decided that this was who he wanted to be that day. He did own a ranch, but in reality he only spent half the time there that he claimed he did (Bederman 178). On his African safaris, he brought bathtubs and pounds of books; Bederman notes that sixty porters were needed to carry his “essentials” (210). Instead of actually spending time in the wild, Roosevelt would bathe and then “retire to drink his tea and eat his imported gingersnaps” (210). No real effort was exuded. Books were his way of discovering the world, which makes it all the more interesting that he missed London’s literary message targeted at him. Roosevelt criticized not the Hal, Charles, and Mercedes scene but London’s portrayal of Buck’s change. London indicated in “The Other Animals” that he avoided having Buck distinctly comprehend his evolutionary changes: “Time and again…in my narratives, I wrote, speaking of my dog-
heroes: ‘He did not think these things; he merely did them,’ etc…. and I did it in order to hammer into the average human understanding that these dog-heroes of mine were not directed by abstract reasoning, but by instinct, sensation, and emotion, and by simple reasoning” (109). In other words, London’s canines do not think in exactly the same way as humans, but they do think. And these attributes are the very ones recognized in the non-human animal by Darwin when he notes, “judgment…often comes into play, even in animals very low in the scale of nature” (230). Though Darwin made distinctions between the brain functions of higher- and lower-order animals, he did not exclude any species. And precisely because London said he intended it, I have found evidence of Buck’s being a fictionalized account of Darwinian natural selection and evolution.

The Path of Evolution

The Call of the Wild is a novel that demonstrates the interconnectedness London saw between humans and animals. Critics generally tend to focus on London’s ideas of kinship with animals by seeing Buck as a direct representation of humanity. In other words, whatever Buck does is a direct metaphor for what humans do. Though Mark Feldman accurately notes that “the most compelling answer to why London wrote stories about animals was that he saw no hard and fast distinction between the human and the animal. Echoing Darwin, he wrote that there ‘are no impassable gulfs’ separating the [two]. In writing about animals, London was always also writing about the human” (169), critics want Buck to be an equal representation of humanity. Feldman, for example, considers Buck the equivalent of the human interior (161). To him, Buck is the animal inside the human; the two are “radically intertwined” (163). In a classic critical piece, Charles Child Walcutt wants Buck to be the animal inside of the human who is reverting
to the wild, but Walcutt seems disappointed in Buck’s lack of a sense of morality and ethical nature: he reasons “The Call of the Wild…does not—indeed it cannot—tell anything about the nature of ‘atavism’ or the operation of determinism” (107), in the human because Buck is a dog and incapable of possessing morals. Similarly Earl J. Wilcox sees it as an absolute necessity that “man and animal become one” in “the struggle for survival” (186), and that any move Buck makes must directly represent humanity because

If London were not drawing inferences about man in his “dog-heroes,” his entire literary career, particularly in relationship to the naturalistic movement, is called into question. For to leave the implications of his struggle-for-survival thesis in the realm of “lower” animals is to relegate the stories to mere animal adventures. Indeed, there would seem to be no London achievement worth quibbling about. (179)

Wilcox does not accept Buck as a dog in his own right. Finally critic Jonathan Auerbach centers on the direct alignment of Buck and humanity through the concept of work, recognizing him as an extension of London’s writing efforts. Auerbach sees Buck as almost completely human and finds “confusion between what [London’s] characters seem to be doing and what London as narrator does for them. In this sense the entire concept of nature that underwrites the literary naturalism…is fundamentally ‘faked’” (88). All in all, none of these critics allow Buck to be a dog. Instead, I say that in The Call of the Wild, animals and humanity are not being completely equalized. Buck is not a direct representation of what humans do; instead he is a critique. He is a reflection of the animal world, an image that provides a view of what humans can and should do. Buck is a reference for us, but he is still a dog.

In the midst of this debate over Buck’s “doggy-ness,” critics tend to focus on Buck’s devolution from humanity instead of what I see as his evolution into the prime canine. To say Buck is “devolving” is to suggest that he becomes less civilized and wilder—in essence, he becomes less of a pet. Buck then devolves from man when man is seen as holding the privileged
position of number one. However, I argue that Buck does not have to equal humanity in his own evolution into the Ghost Dog. Instead, as he evolves, Buck contrasts humanity by highlighting the attitude of those who manipulate nature and try to become something else overnight (with no work and no training). The attitude of control and the desire to dictate one’s true character—who and what we are and are to become—is consuming and can be dangerous, if not life threatening as London’s scene with Hal, Charles, and Mercedes shows. London critiques the American trend of thinking of ourselves in very elitist and entitled ways (as demonstrated in Roosevelt’s ideas). We think we are the most important beings. Though humanity’s supremacy to the lower animals in terms of technology and social advancements is undeniable, it does not negate our responsibility to respect other forms of life. This supremacy does not take away from their being. As the rest of this essay shows, Buck’s evolution into the famed Ghost Dog shows that London’s understanding of Darwinian natural selection makes *The Call of the Wild* an example of true evolution in the most primitive of worlds. Buck submits to nature’s control. He lets nature guide him. He does not equal humans but shows us how to adapt ourselves to the world we share with the animals. He adapts to his environment; he improves physically and faces competition. Paul Civello clarifies that “Darwinian evolution is not primarily progressive, but adaptive. It is progressive only in so far as it moves a species toward greater adaptability to a particular environment, not—as would often be claimed—toward an idealistic high form…in Darwinian evolution, the highest form of life in a tropical swamp could very well be a frog” (8). Civello’s indication then that a frog has the potential to be the highest order of frog can be is reflected on London’s characterization of Buck. As a canine, he has the potential to be the highest order of canine; Buck has the right to be a dog. Important to this concept is a reading of Darwin himself. Concluding *The Origin of Species*, Darwin writes “Hence we may look with some confidence to
a secure future of great length. And as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection” (462), when, and only when, that being “takes advantage of such variations as arise and are beneficial to each creature under its complex relations of life” (118). Buck does take advantage of the variations he finds in and around himself. I suggest looking at Buck in terms of the dog-wolf that he is, and in this way, freeing Buck to follow the line of natural evolution Darwin outlined, and this essay looks at Buck’s alleged devolution as an evolution in its own right.

Buck is in a position to become over-civilized but does not because he remains in constant interaction with nature. The Call of the Wild begins with Buck in the highest position a domestic dog can be in relation to humans; he is “king over all the creeping, crawling, flying things of Judge Miller’s place, humans included” (London 6). He rules over all the dogs on the property, including the over-civilized Toots and Ysabel, the pampered lap dogs. Buck, however, maintains a “working partnership [and] pompous guardianship” with the Judge’s children and grandchildren, all the while holding a “stately and dignified friendship” with the Judge himself (61). Clearly he has the choice to live like the pampered dogs or a working dog. However, though having “lived the life of a sated aristocrat; he had a fine pride in himself, was ever a trifle egotistical, as country gentlemen sometimes become because of their insular situation” (6), but choosing not to let it make him lazy, he is fit for natural selection, defined by Darwin’s asking Can it, then, be thought improbable, seeing that variations useful to man have undoubtedly occurred, that other variations useful in some way to each being in the great and complex battle of life should occur in the course of many successive generations? If such do occur, can we doubt (remembering that many more individuals are born than can possibly survive) that individuals having any advantage, however slight, over others, would have the best chance of surviving and of procreating their kind? […] This preservation of favourable individual differences and variations, and the destruction of those which are injurious, I have called Natural Selection, or the Survival of the Fittest. (Origin of Species 80-81)
This definition shows how Buck is slated not only to survive but also thrive through the process of natural selection. Darwin himself would be hard-pressed to find a better candidate: Buck is the offspring of a Saint Bernard and a Scotch shepherd or Collie (London Call of the Wild 6). Nature has selected Buck because he is the fortunate result of selective breeding—his father was the Judge’s “inseparable companion” (London Call 6)—and nature, which “cares nothing for appearances,” selects “only for that of the being which she tends. Every selected character is fully exercised by her, as is implied the fact of their selection” (Darwin 83). Nature does not play favorites but simply chooses those most adaptable to her changing conditions. Buck profited more under the control of nature than the control of man, who refuses to acknowledge his place in nature. Darwin points out that “[under] nature, the slightest differences of structure or constitution may well turn the nicely balanced scale in the struggle for life, and so be preserved. How fleeting are the wishes and efforts of man! how short his time! and consequently how poor will be his results, compared with those accumulated by Nature during whole geological periods!” (83). By following nature, Buck thrives. He begins as 140 pounds of muscle (London Call 5), and survives because of his strength, savagery, cunning, pride, imagination, instinct, patience, and unbreakable heart, and throughout the novel, nature only heightens these qualities in him, and Buck’s process of evolution into the Ghost Dog, then, is unmistakable.

Legitimate change, not merely a glossing over of the self, marks Buck’s evolution. Buck’s evolution begins “in the fall of 1897 [when] the Klondike strike dragged men from all the world into the frozen North” (London Call 6-7). Pulled from their homes by the allure of “yellow metal” (5), these men needed dogs, and with the chinking sound of money changing hands between the Judge’s gardener and the solitary man (7), Buck becomes a commodity, taking on the literal significance of his name. In this first transaction, Buck is worth $150 (8). Beginning
here, Buck enters a cycle in which several actions characterize his movements through the evolutionary process: anger, confusion, resolve, transformation, learning, and action. These actions repeat, though not always in the same order. Earl J. Wilcox mentions that Darwin identified “no clearly definable pattern” (183) of evolution. I support this because there is no pattern of change and/or improvement for each and every species. However, I do note a repeating set of actions in Buck specifically. This is the proof. They do not happen in the same order, but they mark his changes. And it is a genuine change. In the novel, Buck is never again the dog he starts off as, and this transformation contrasts the hollowness of Roosevelt’s imaged persona.

Buck’s first evolutionary cycle (including confusion, anger, and resolve) begins when his manhandling and forced exit from the ranch stirs in him the “unbridled anger of a kidnapped king” (London Call 8), and he becomes a commodity in the race for the “yellow metal.” Buck’s initial confusion of his whereabouts after he is kidnapped is challenged and quickly trumped by this anger because “for two days and nights Buck neither ate nor drank…and his anger waxed and waxed…and fanned his wrath to fever-pitch…that boded ill for whoever first fell foul of him” (9-10). Upon his meeting the man in the red sweater, Buck had already resolved “[they] would never get another rope around his neck” (10); “his eyes turned blood-shot, and he was metamorphosed into a raging fiend. So changed was he that the Judge himself would not have recognized him…Buck was truly a red-eyed devil” (10). This man in the red sweater introduces Buck to the law of the club, which he initially meets with confusion. “He had never been struck by a club in his life, and did not understand,” but with “exquisite agony” and “a roar that was almost lionlike in its ferocity” (11), a death-roar to his valley ranch kingdom, Buck learns that “a man with a club was a lawgiver, a master to be obeyed, though not necessarily conciliated” (12).
This “introduction to the reign of primitive law” (12), marks where Buck’s confusion lessens and is replaced by learning, and as a result, his price doubles to $300. Buck’s rarity is striking in that not all individual members of a species are adaptable. Not all are meant to thrive. Buck is an exception. “Perrault [his new owner] grinned. Considering that the price of dogs had been boomed skyward by the unwonted demand, it was not an unfair sum for so fine an animal…Perrault knew dogs, and when he looked at Buck he knew that he was one in a thousand—‘One in ten t’ousand,’ he commented mentally” (13). Perrault recognizes this, and his comment is indicative of Buck’s forward progress to come.

Buck’s second cycle of evolution (consisting mostly of learning, resolve, and transformation) begins during his physical journey north as he is “jerked from the heart of civilization and flung into the heart of things primordial” (London Call 15). When he meets his future enemy, the hyena-like Spitz, who “ran out his scarlet tongue in a way he had of laughing” (16), Buck witnesses for the first time “the wolf manner of fighting, to strike and leap away” (15). Forced to watch with confused helplessness as his partner is victimized by the pack, Buck quickly resolves that other dogs will never pull him down (16). He is introduced to the traces and, in the span of a few hours, learns to pull his own weight (16). His thought process is focusing the deeper he gets into the natural environment. For example, after his first night in the snow from which he awakens enveloped, momentarily confused by the surrounding whiteness, Buck connects with his primitive side for the first time through a specialized fear: “the fear of the wild thing for the trap” (19). In a way, a sense of rightness is overtaking him—subconsciously he knows the wild is where he belongs. Distractions from the civilized world are fading away. In him, the sense is arising that only what he needs to know to survive is necessary. Moreover, there are other key details to note at this point in the text.
London’s development of Buck—his own physicality and his economic value—is subtly arranged throughout the text as if to reinforce the subtleness of the changes coming upon him as well as his and the reader’s understanding of them. First, I note that Buck is an “apt scholar,” and after being corrected by the other dogs or the whip, he learns that it is “cheaper to mend his ways than to retaliate” (London Call 20). Two, he “swiftly lost the fastidiousness which had characterized his old life” (21); he watches the more adept dogs, learns how to steal for his hunger and avoid getting caught, thus “[saving] his hide” (22), and marking himself “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, the decay or going to pieces of his moral nature, a vain thing and a handicap in the ruthless struggle for existence” (21). By this London draws the line of demarcation between the primitive and civilized worlds; he writes that morality, which is “all well enough in the Southland, under the law of love and fellowship” is foolish “under the law of club and fang,” and whoever would choose to observe it now “would fail to prosper” (21). Buck’s physical changes also give proof of his decivilization: his muscles harden, and he is “callous to all ordinary pain. He achieved an internal as well as an external economy” (22), eating less food but using more of it, and he strengthens his senses of sight, scent, and hearing, which leads to the third key point—and his first complete reach back into the primitive—“not only did he learn by experience, but instincts long dead became alive again. The domesticated generations fell from him,” and when he “howled long and wolflike, it was his ancestors, dead and dust, pointing nose at star and howling down through the centuries and through him…Thus, as token of what a puppet thing life is, the ancient song surged through him and he came into his own again” (22-23). Here I want to draw attention to London’s use of monetary-related words: cheaper, economy, and save; Buck is
lowering his cost-of-living while increasing his value, the capitalist’s dream. Buck is also in the process of severing those same monetary puppet strings that hold and entangle the civilized American man.

Once genuine changes have developed and strengthened him physically, Buck continues on the path of evolution by facing competition. Darwin notes “Each new form, also, as soon as it has been much improved, will be able to spread over the open and continuous area, and will thus come into competition with many other forms” (102), and though Buck has competed in some way with every other dog he has encountered in the Northland thus far (for food, shelter, and position in the traces), Spitz is his prime competitor. “The dominant primordial beast” that was alive in Buck now thrives by “cunning,” “poise,” and “control,” with a “deliberateness” in action, not rash or “precipitate” (London, Call 24). Competition with Spitz is growing stronger by the day, and Buck is again reaching the heights of anger he experienced with the man in the red sweater. In one incident, Spitz steals Buck’s bed, and London explains that until this moment Buck had “avoided trouble with his enemy, but this was too much. The beast in him roared. He sprang upon Spitz with a fury which surprised them both” (25). The combination of this fury with what happens moments later will come back to haunt Spitz: When a starving dog-team attacks the camp, Buck and his team defend it violently, and the blood that Buck tastes for the first time “goaded him to greater fierceness” (26). As one of Darwin’s identified requirements for evolution, Buck stands up to his competitors. He competes against Spitz and draws not only on his newfound strength and endurance but his instincts that were there all along. Buck demonstrates virility and is beginning to dominate those weaker than him. I see in him a dog’s version of Roosevelt’s goal of staggering human masculinity
Physically and mentally Buck is adapting to his environment. Buck’s evolution continues as action takes over where confusion, even learning, reigned: “At the Pelly one morning, as they were harnessing up, Dolly, who had never been conspicuous for anything, went suddenly mad…then sprang straight for Buck. He had never seen a dog go mad, nor did he have any reason to fear madness; yet he knew that here was horror, and fled away from it in a panic” (London Call 29). He is learning to react with a minimum of delay, which guides him toward his goal of leading the team. In a striking paragraph, London again contrasts the Southland, or the over-civilized region, and Buck’s exceptional journey, and by highlighting his ever-increasing competition with Spitz, London foreshadows Buck’s ultimate championship:

Spitz, as lead-dog and acknowledged master of the team, felt his supremacy threatened by this strange Southland dog. And strange Buck was to him, for of the many Southland dogs he had known, not one had shown up worthily in camp and on trail. They were all too soft, dying under the toil, the frost, and starvation. Buck was the exception. He alone endured and prospered, matching the husky in strength, savagery, and cunning. Then he was a masterful dog, and what made him dangerous was the fact that the club of the man in the red sweater had knocked all blind pluck and rashness out of his desire for mastery. He was preeminently cunning, and could bide his time with a patience that was nothing less than primitive. (29-30)

As Buck lets nature take control of his movements, it becomes “inevitable that the clash for leadership should come. Buck wanted it…because it was his nature, because he had been gripped tight by that nameless, incomprehensible pride of the trail and trace” (30); however, he has not yet completed the transition to the wild. In the Northland, man’s law is still intact, though weakening its hold on Buck as he progresses out of the human world by identifying with the howls he hears from the wild dogs and wolves; the “long-drawn wailings and half-sobs…one of the first songs of the younger world…marked the completeness with which he harked back through the ages of fire and roof to the raw beginnings of life in the howling ages” (32). By embracing the natural world, Buck is progressing towards becoming the ultimate canine.
Through these scenes he reflects to the American public London’s desire for mankind to live in harmony with nature. Buck demonstrates the benefits of this kind of life. He is letting go of over-civilized society and embracing his true self. If nothing else, he enjoys the simple and natural reality of this new life. It goads him on to continue his journey.

Darwinian evolution takes place over generations, but London, embracing the essence of literature, demonstrates this process in Buck’s lifetime. The competition finally ends in Spitz’s death, but by this time, Buck’s taste for blood had already told him that “it was nothing new or strange, this scene of old time. It was as though it had always been, the wonted way of things” (London Call 35). He takes over the team just as it changes owners again, and this time Buck’s worth equals $1,000. This transaction marks an increase in Buck’s distancing of himself from humans; he becomes an automaton in a “monotonous life, operating with machine-like regularity” (40). He increasingly experiences atavistic dream visions during nights by the fire, honing his instincts and the primal senses “which had lapsed in later days, and still later, in him, quickened and become alive again” (41). Buck is connecting with the instincts and primal memories he has always possessed, only they were lessened and almost eradicated by his civilized domestication. As Buck distances himself from the civilized world, we see the benefits of a life lived according to nature: strength, agility of the body and the mind, and an economical physicality as he cuts the ties of American capitalist society. Buck achieves the Ghost Dog status because he lets nature guide him. Chosen for natural selection, he rejects his nearly over-civilized life and embarks on a lengthy, arduous journey into the natural world. President Theodore Roosevelt, who took a stand against over-civilization, attempted to portray the very qualities Buck exhibits but without acknowledging the discipline required to attain them. Jack
London uses the construction of Buck’s evolution in order to show the lack of Theodore Roosevelt’s.

Conclusion

Though politically London and Roosevelt had much in common (imperialism and Social Darwinism issues) they differed when nature was the topic at hand. London is well known for his nature writing and quite possibly his dog stories are his most famous as Buck is London’s clearest interpretation of Darwin’s The Origin of Species. Buck achieves so much when he lets nature control his movements and hone his instincts, and he becomes London’s call for humanity to do the same. Staying in tune with nature is a concept London shares with Zora Neale Hurston and Mark Twain. Though we live in a continually modernizing nation, the key goal all these works attest to is that we must keep nature from becoming a distant memory and an unfamiliar place. The benefits far outweigh the downsides. London especially stresses that his definition of the future is one that embraces the past. He writes “the universe is in flux…definitions are arbitrary and ephemeral…. Definitions cannot rule life. Definitions cannot be made to rule life. Life must rule definitions or else the definitions perish” (London “Other Animals” 118). But to London, what did remain the same is that nature must always be one of the defining elements of life, especially as life itself changes.
Chapter Note

1 See Robert Peluso, “Gazing at Royalty: Jack London’s ‘The People of the Abyss’ and the Emergence of American Imperialism,” Rereading Jack London, eds. Leonard Cassuto and Jeanne Campbell Reesman (Stanford: Stanford UP: 1996), where he indicates “Virtually every commentator on London has noted the tensions and conflicts in his politics” (240 n.9) indicating that his Socialist views and his American ties often clashed, such as “the seemingly antithetical commitments to nationalism and internationalism, to class equality and racial superiority” (57). Peluso rounds out his own argument by connecting it to critic Carolyn Johnston whose argument “concludes that London’s socialism was deeply indebted to ‘traditional American values and the democratic political tradition, with an ample infusion of [agrarian] utopianism’” (240 n.9).
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Nature is an undeniably important part of American literature. As a nation with such a short history in the grand scheme of time, America today is not that far away in years from when she was a country wild and untamed or at least from when it felt that way. The medium of literature has the power to embrace and revisit times past and eras lost. I have chosen Zora Neale Hurston, Mark Twain, and Jack London precisely because in the works of these authors I see an embrace of the natural world and an urging for the reader to maintain an awareness of the environment. Each writer demonstrates in his or her work an individual interpretation of what it means to live in harmony with nature, as important in each one’s time of publication as now.

I tie these three specific authors together because they all demonstrate being in tune with nature through imagery of the animal. In different ways, all three implore that a respect for animals and respect for nature is a vital part of any worthwhile human existence. To respect nature is to realize its power and be open to the ways it can manifest itself in daily life. Living a life in tune with nature brings a deeper grasp of one’s own personal nature (an understanding of why we do the things we do). Hurston, Twain, and London all use animals in their writing to celebrate nature. Each encouraged readers to seek the benefits of nature in order to become a better human being, forge a stronger community, and develop a deeper unity in the nation. By learning from the positive example of the animals, we learn how to share our world with them and with each other.

The idea of analyzing the embrace of environmental concerns in literature is not a new idea but has recently made its name as a new category of criticism. The term “ecocriticism,” coined by one William Rueckert in the late 1970s, is a movement to discover “literary-
environmental connections” that include “nonhuman as well as human contexts and considerations” (Love 4, 1). More specifically, Glen Love observes that “the blanket term ecocriticism has come to be accepted…[as] one of ferment and experimentation” (5), and includes a staggering array of environmental related topics. He names a few: “nature writing, deep ecology, the ecology of cities, ecofeminism, the literature of toxicity, environmental justice, bioregionalism, the lives of animals, the revaluation of place, interdisciplinarity, eco-theory, the expansion of the canon to include previously unheard voices, and the reinterpretation of canonical works from the past” (5). And to this body of work I hope to offer my analyses of Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God, Mark Twain’s “The Stolen White Elephant,” Roughing It and Pudd’nhead Wilson, and Jack London’s The Call of the Wild. Though these works certainly have been scrutinized critically in broad terms of nature, my reading is specific to the author’s vision of the good in animals and what humanity can stand to learn from them as well as the ways in which each work demonstrates the benefits for the human who attempts to live a life fully in tune with nature.
WORKS CITED


