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## NATURALISM IN JACK LONDON'S SHORT STORY 'THE LAW OF LIFE'



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### ABSTRACT:

In this research paper I try to demonstrate how naturalism is reflected in Jack London's short story 'The Law of life'. First I explain naturalism as a literary movement. In brief I will show the emergence of naturalism as a movement in American Literature. Further I proceed to consider realism and state the difference between the two movements. I will show how Nietzsche's concept of 'will to power' plays a vital role in shaping the selected short story. A brief summary of the short story will follow and this will be followed by its critical analysis the characteristics of naturalism.

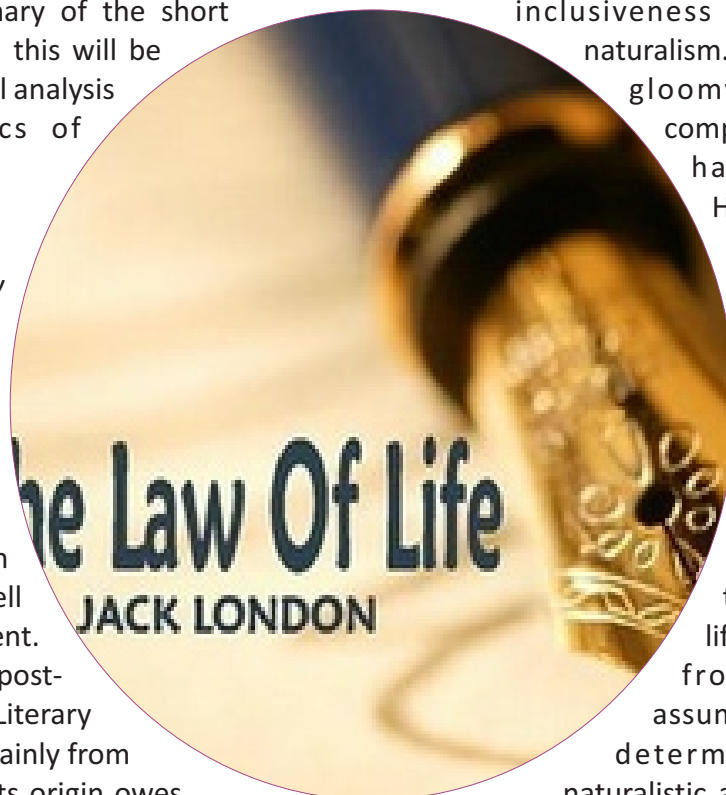
### KEY WORDS:

*Naturalism, 'The Law of Life', demonstrate, characteristics of naturalism.*

### INTRODUCTION:

Naturalism is a late 19th and early 20th century literary as well as aesthetic movement. It is based on the post-Darwinian biology. "Literary naturalism derives mainly from a biological model. Its origin owes much to Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution, based on his theory of natural selection. Darwin created a context that made naturalism- with its emphasis on theories of

heredity and environment – a convincing way to explain the nature of reality for the late nineteenth century."<sup>1</sup> Naturalism applies the adaptations of the principles and methods of natural science, especially the Darwinian view of nature, to literature and art. In literature naturalism is the extension of realism. Naturalism portrays life but the portrayal of life is starkly realistic. Thus naturalism is the extreme form of realism. Naturalism aims at more faithful, unselective representation of life. The inclusiveness of life is lost in naturalism. Its focus is the dark, gloomy side of life. It completely neglects the happy-go-lucky life. Hence it is starkly realistic. It is not close to reality because life is a mixture of happy and sad moments. T.S. Eliot opines that Literature, like life, should be inclusive. But naturalism lacks this inclusiveness of life. Naturalism differed from realism in its assumption of scientific determinism, which led naturalistic authors to emphasize man's accidental, physiological nature rather than his moral or rational qualities. Individual characters were seen as helpless products of heredity and environment, motivated



by strong instinctual drives from within and harassed by social and economic pressures from without. As such, they had little will or responsibility for their fates, and the prognosis for their "cases" was pessimistic at the outset.<sup>2</sup>

Naturalism emerged in France in the last three decades of the 19th century. Its roots are found in the book *History of English Literature* (published in 1871) written by Hippolyte Taine. According to him there is a cause for ambition, for courage as there is cause for every organic action in the body. Though in literature naturalism began in the novels of Goncourt brothers, its true exponent is Emile Zola. His book "The Experimental Novel" marks the beginning of naturalism in literature in the true sense. In this book he looks at a novelist as a scientist. He believes that a novelist is no more an observer but a detached experimenter, who subjects his characters' emotions to a series of tests and who works with emotional and social facts as a chemist does with matter.

One of the reasons of the emergence of naturalism in American Literature was the ineradicable Calvinism in Americans' nature. Calvinism is the belief in predestination and the doctrine of Original Sin. The Enlightenment gave a rationalistic view of the universe being directed by the force of nature. It offered a benevolent God identifiable with natural forces which could be measured and understood through the application of reason. In the latter half of the 19th century there was rise of scientific knowledge in the field of biology because of the publication of *Evolution of Species* by Charles Darwin in 1858. This scientific knowledge showed man as a chemism, damned by his weakness against the universe but not by the Original Sin. Apart from that after the Civil War there was rapacious and untrammelled industrial and political growth in America. Government used the laissez faire principle. There was a change in the economic pattern from individual enterprise into mass production, machine technology and industrial capitalism. Ordinary man became victim of sweatshops, starvation wages, unfair competition and erratic irresponsible price fixing. The rich men controlled the market, the jobs and at times even the government. In 1880s and 1890s severe business recessions brought about severe insecurity, suffering and even violence among the working people. Because of science, the machine came into being. The workers and the capitalists became servants of the machine. For the writer man was no more the highest species. He was replaced by scientific technology and machine. Among the notable American naturalists are Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Jack London and chiefly Theodore Dreiser.

Realism is the portrayal of life as it is. It is impartial and not one sided picture of life because it has inclusiveness of life. It does not tend to ignore the happy life nor the gloomy one. It gives justice to the realistic portrayal of life. Like naturalism, incidents and situations are chosen from day to day life but the atmosphere or the setting is not always a slum or poverty stricken area as in naturalism. Here naturalism and realism differ. Sometimes naturalism tends to become a part of propagandist literature but that is not so with realism. In both naturalism and realism the experiences are ordinary but in naturalism everything is to the excess. In realism the treatment of material may or may not be amoral but in naturalism it is amoral. Naturalism shows man as a pawn, a helpless creature while realism shows him as the master of his fate, to some extent. In naturalism scientific determinism is important and hence the characters tends to lose faith in God whereas in realism there is faith in God. Naturalists tend to show pessimism in life whereas realists show pessimism as well as optimism in life.

To understand why there was spiritual and moral decadence we must look at the concept of the 'will to power' propounded by Fredrick Nietzsche. Nietzsche believes that to understand the human nature biology is more important than psychology. He is of the opinion that our entire organic functions and intrinsic life can be explained with the help of the concept of 'the will to power'. He opines that there are some forces which are involved in the upholding of life processes such as feeling, thinking,

spiritual functions and willing. These forces and their operation can be explained by the idea of 'will to power'. The wish to preserve oneself is the symptom of a condition of distress, of a limitation. Its aim is the expansion of power. But the struggle for self-preservation (for existence) is only an exception. It is a temporary restriction of the will to life. Life is the expression of forms of growth of power. The aim of will to life is the expansion of power. The real fundamental instinct of life aims at the expansion of power. This aim ultimately leads to exploitation. The expansion of power ends ultimately in absolute power and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Therefore exploitation results in corruption.

The naturalism evolved by Jack London is different from that of other naturalists in the sense that it was influenced by his personal experiences. "Jack London participated in the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897, in the process surviving harsh wilderness conditions and collecting vivid material for the many Northland stories and novels he published around the turn of the century. Shaped by his study of Spencer, his readings in Marx, his admiration for Kipling, and his attraction to Nietzsche, London evolved a contradictory proletarian naturalism concerned less with social equality than with an ethos of indomitability. Survival is the quintessential theme of London's Northland narratives.<sup>3</sup> In his collections of short stories published after 1910, London depicted both the life he had known as a merchant sailor and the exotic places he had visited while cruising the South Pacific aboard his schooner Snark. He devised adventure plots set against striking natural landscapes, insistently dramatizing scenes of injustice in a starkly naturalistic order where only the fittest and fiercest survive.

Jack London's short story 'The Law of Life' is a model example of naturalism where the old and tired protagonist gives in to the brutal forces of nature as he is not fit for survival. The story is set in the Tundra region. It is winter there. The protagonist Old Koskoosh is old. He nostalgically reflects upon his past life. He is sitting near the hearth and warming himself. He feels lonely, helpless and deserted. The tribesmen have gone for hunting and he is left alone since he is too old to hunt. None cares for him. He is convinced that one has to be born and die, as Eliot says, "Birth, and copulation, and death"<sup>4</sup>. In the end of the story he is attacked by a herd of wild animals. He fights but finds himself helpless and dies.

The title of the short story is very suggestive. It tells us about the Darwinian biology. The theme also takes us to the early stages in the process of evolution of man which was the primary concern of Darwin. It is winter. The story is set in the Tundra region, the coldest place on earth where man's ability to withstand the nature at its worst is tested. Old Koskoosh, as his name suggests, is old. His eye sight is faded and his forehead is withered. The narrator informs that although he is a very intelligent man he has lost interest in the affairs of the world because he knows that he is very close to death. But he cannot digest this truth. The thought of death makes him panicky and he stretches his palsied hands that tremble as he puts wood in hearth to keep himself warm and defy death. He believes that after birth, everyone has to die. The atmosphere is gloomy and dark. His granddaughter Sit-cum-to-ha is near him but she does not care for him because "life called her, and the duties of life, not death"<sup>5</sup> whereas for Koskoosh death called him, not life. He does not complain for being neglected by others.

The atmosphere is haunted by death. A small fretful child named Little Koo-tee is so sick that he will die in a next few moments. The narrator informs "what did it matter if the boy dies? A few years at best, and as many an empty belly as a full one. And in the end, Death waited, ever-hungry and hungriest of them all"<sup>6</sup>. There is hunger. Koskoosh feels that he is alone. Everyone has passed out of his life, and he faces the last bitter hour alone. He knows that it is the law of life that when one grows old one has to be deserted by everyone; one has to be alone and die alone. He tells his son, "I am as a last year's leaf, clinging lightly to the stem. The first breath that blows, and I fall. My voice is become like an old woman's"<sup>7</sup>. The narrator expresses the futility of human life. "... his hand crept out in haste to the wood. It alone stood between him and the eternity that yawned in upon him. At last the measure of his life was a

handful of fagots"<sup>8</sup>. What stood between Koskoosh's life and death is a piece of dried wood. His life is totally at the mercy of a piece of dried wood which is a part of the nature. He does not complain because he strongly believes that it is the law of life. He says, "To perpetuate is the task of life, its law was death"<sup>9</sup>. The perpetual of the cycle of life and death is the only reality and nothing else. Nature does not care about the individual; what he did in life and what he didn't. He thinks that individuals are like clouds from a summer sky that pass away like episodes and he too is one of the episodes. This is applicable men as well women, to human beings as well as to animals. "The little tree-squirrel crawled away to die. When age settled upon the rabbit it became slow and heavy, and could no longer outfoot its enemies."<sup>10</sup>

Koskoosh reflects upon the past nostalgically. That is only what he could do. He remembers how he had abandoned his own father on an upper reach of the Klondike one winter. He recollects a famine that brought with it malnutrition, starvation and death. The life of his tribe is at the mercy of nature. The famine lasted for seven years. It almost wiped out his tribe. He lost his mother. "And through the long darkness the children wailed and died, and the women, and the old men; and not one in ten of the tribe lived to meet the sun when it came back in the spring. That was a famine!"<sup>11</sup> Koskoosh also has fond memories of the good times as well. He recollects his encounter as a hunter along with his friend Zing-ha. The memory of the old wolf who is left alone by its pack and succumbs to his hunters also underscores that the law of life is applicable to animals as well. He fondly remembers his youth and his valour as the head of the tribesmen. In the end of the story he is attacked by a herd of moose. He fights but feels helpless and gives up the fight because he knew it was the law of life. "Again he saw the last stand of the old bull moose, and Koskoosh dropped his head wearily upon his knees. What did it matter after all? Was it not the law of life?"<sup>12</sup>

Thus Jack London attempts to explain the intricate relationships between civilization and wilderness, survival and comfort, struggle and comfort. His characters articulate an intuitive wisdom about natural law.

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