

## Lessons Learned from Hobbs, London, and the Yukon Gold Rush

**A**s teachers who regularly use literature to make connections across the curriculum, our finding two trade books that addressed language arts and social studies themes with a focus on the Yukon Gold Rush offered exciting opportunities for meaningful learning, both by our students and by us as teachers. Fortunately, a local eighth grade language arts teacher shared our enthusiasm for this project because it addressed parts of a unit that she was already teaching. The connections between Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* and Will Hobbs' *Jason's Gold* seemed natural: they shared settings and characters in a general way, but they also shared themes that students saw reflected in their own environment.

Evident in both books were the gold rush mentality, dog and master relationships, demanding physical and social environments, and author connections even though 100 years apart. The authors shared stylistic characteristics that let readers make connections between the two books. Both authors used realism and naturalism to keep readers involved.

All of these aspects excited us; we could pair a hard-to-read "classic" with an eighth grade reader-friendly young adult literature selection as recommended by Joan Kaywell in *Adolescent Literature as a Complement to the Classics* (1995 ix) while integrating language

arts, social studies and other curriculum areas (Daniels and Bizar 269-280). This integration afforded opportunities for all of us to learn lessons about teaching, lessons that gave us pedagogical reasons for addressing nonfiction and primary sources while examining literary elements and creative writing prompts. Just how all these lessons melded for eighth graders, for a language arts teacher, and for two university faculty members follows. As you read, look for lessons that can be adapted for your students, your teaching, and your curriculum.

We designed a four-week unit for the eighth graders that included following the development of characters, keeping a wilderness journal, searching for

primary documents that would augment historical understandings, and finding examples of naturalism in both novels. Students began by reading *Jason's Gold* and completed activities to enrich their literary understandings and awareness of the historical time period. The objectives were for students to gain a deeper understanding of London's writing and his literary craft by reading *Jason's Gold* first and identifying with Jason and the entire time period before they met London's dog, Buck. *Jason's Gold* gave students a solid historical context of the Yukon Gold Rush to aid their understanding of more complex issues in their second

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book, *The Call of the Wild*. In students' reading of London's work, they then expanded their awareness of setting, characterization, theme and style. These planned activities focused the students on reading for understanding as well as pleasure.

Hobbs "blessed" our efforts as he originated the idea of connecting both works. The inspiration for *Jason's Gold* was Hobbs' visit to the Yukon Territory and London's home as well as a museum in Dawson City where he examined photographs of gold seekers climbing Chilkoot Pass. He imagined a story that gave "the big picture" of the Yukon Gold Rush and had Jason meeting London himself (Hobbs, paragraph 4). These several meetings of Jason and London throughout *Jason's Gold* provided a natural connection to the two works.

## Setting

We began both novels by examining the setting. Many of the activities we created for this unit enabled students to paint a picture in their minds of the hustle and bustle of late nineteenth century Seattle, the treacherous conditions of the Chilkoot Pass, and the rudimentary living conditions gold rushers experienced in destination cities such as Dawson. By using an 1895 map of the Yukon region (Stern) to locate major stopping points on the journey to the gold fields from Skagway or Dyea, the eighth graders embraced the challenge of finding towns, lakes, rivers and mountain passes that characters in both books mentioned during their travels. Using the period maps made the experience authentic and meaningful to our students (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/>). They had to use the type of information available to people during that era. To help them visualize the terrain, the wintry conditions of the mountains, as well as the clothing and supplies the gold seekers carried, the students also examined photographs of the Yukon Gold Rush. They viewed pictures of a crowded steamship leaving a Seattle port (Jones, 51), numerous dead horses covering White Pass (Jones, 57), a seemingly endless line of stampedeers climbing the Golden Stairs to Chilkoot Pass (Jones, 62), and several gold rushers braving White Horse Rapids in their make shift boat (Murphy and Haigh, 43, Jones, 62). Primary docu-

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ments also helped students visualize and understand the setting and the mind set during the gold rush (Crooks). After describing the images and conditions they saw, students hypothesized the locations of these photographs on the 1895 map and supported their remarks with information they had gathered from the readings. These two activities provided a solid base for understanding setting—location and time period.

Coupled with these lessons, students were asked to verify facts in both books, which often led to more in-depth explorations of place and history. Students researched specific key locations such as Five Fingers, Lake Lebarge, and Porcupine Hill. The eighth graders also investigated notable figures from this time period found in Hobbs' *Jason's Gold*: Soapy Smith (31, 210) George Washington Carmack (158), Skookum Jim (159), and Kate Carmack (159). Some students also explored the steps for building log cabins and analyzed the purpose of mosquito nets in the Yukon. All of these findings gave context to the stories; they provided students with a sense of what was real, accurate, and true. Because students recorded notes and reflections in their wilderness journals, they also drew pictures to illuminate their understandings of place and history. We called their notebooks "wilderness journals" to mimic remembering the places and times and ideas of the novels.

Another activity, the creation of newspaper stories, reflected students' best understanding of setting. By creating news articles, editorials, and human interest stories to reflect the 1898 time period, students learned to describe events and locations as "eyewitness reporters." In her letter to the editor, one student spoke with a sense of realism:

The streets of Dawson need to be worked on. The mud is more than a foot deep. My dogs can no longer pull the sleds through it. People are starting to use the sides of the street to prevent walking through the mess.

Another student described the setting for his news story with facts as well:

From Skagway, a 600-mile trek led over the coastal range and down to the Yukon River headwaters. Along these trails were the greatest hardships of all. Cold, ice and snow; agony and misery; murders and suicides; hypothermia, avalanches.

Disappointment and heartbreak [sic]. Few who started out ever reached the gold fields.

Both students provided clear images for their readers. They described specific conditions of the Yukon region in the late 1800s. The creative products demonstrated students' depth of understanding as well as their enthusiasm for the topics.

## Lessons Learned: Setting

Using the 1895 map, old Yukon Gold Rush photographs, and the text of *Jason's Gold* provided students with a sufficient understanding of the setting for both books. Students carefully scrutinized the maps, and they were enthralled with the pictures. They were able to pick out details of when and where the photographs were taken and replicated some of the images they had seen in their own wilderness journal drawings. In students' newspaper writings they also proved they had an understanding of setting; the ads, stories, and letters were put into an accurate context.

Next time, to give students a stronger sense of place, we would have them attach the photographs on the map to note the location of each. We would also have students revisit the photographs during the reading of *The Call of the Wild* to make sure that they were following Buck's trip and grasping the harshness of the environment he experienced. Finally, we would emphasize the wilderness journals even more as the drawings and reflections gave us additional proof of student understandings of setting.

## Characterization

We purposefully selected *Jason's Gold* and *The Call of the Wild* because of their historical connections to the Yukon Gold Rush and also because of their two strong protagonists, Jason and Buck. Both braved the harsh elements of the Alaskan and Canadian wilderness. They both needed survival skills and a solid intellect to withstand the physical and mental anguish they experienced. They both needed to learn to work within a "system" and maintain their individual identities. Buck needed to discern the intricacies of the rule of the pack. Jason needed to understand the "gold rush mindset" in which greed, corruption, and selfishness often ruled. Both characters matured in the harsh setting and were not jaded by the mistreatment

they experienced. They did not lose complete faith in everyone, but instead retained a healthy skepticism of a few. Buck finally obtained a good master in John Thornton, and Jason developed friendships with several individuals during his journey. At the end of both stories, the main characters returned to their "families." While Buck did not return to his human family in California, he became part of a new family in the wild. He became a leader of a pack of wolves, a master of the wilderness. Jason, however, reunited with his brothers and started a new life with them in Alaska.

Because of these and other parallels between Buck and Jason, a key objective we had for the eighth graders was to examine the characterization of each protagonist. We asked students to analyze the role of survival evident in the characters' actions and their responses to nature and humans. Students participated in class discussions and composed essays explaining Buck and Jason's ability to survive the Canadian environment when others could not.

When analyzing the character of Buck, many students chose words such as intelligent, determined, and loyal. They noted strengths he possessed such as his large physical size and his aptitude for making quick, sound decisions. They recognized that Buck's ability to adapt to new surroundings and to learn necessary survival skills contributed greatly to his success in the pack and in the wild. One student wrote,

He was a fast learner and he adapted well to his new environment. Buck learned the law of the club and fang quickly and also how to stay warm when the dogs slept at night. He learned to burrow a hole in the snow and sleep there.

Students also recognized that Buck was smart in a variety of ways. He made wise decisions, especially during difficult times. One student commented in his final essay about Buck, "When he found a trail of blood leading to John Thornton, he decided to move on instead of grieving over it. It took a lot of will power to do that after his ideal master was dead."

Over and over again the students acknowledged that Buck was courageous and able to persevere because he learned from his mistakes. One student summarized, "His power of being able to understand what is going on, to remembering what he learned, and applying that knowledge was a great asset."

Students noted similar qualities when describing

Jason. They portrayed him as determined, intelligent, and hard working. One student wrote,

He had the will to get there and the courage to do so. Jason was also determined and when everything looked bad, he never gave up. His skills he acquired during his time away from home helped him. He learned to live on his own hook and therefore had the need to be on his own and not take the easy way out.

Students also depicted Jason as caring, good-natured, and adventurous. One student commented, “Being kind-hearted earned him the reward of King and together they made a fine team to survive during their travels . . .” Jason acquired King, his dog, as he struggled to climb White Pass and witnessed King being beaten by his master, a man who had reached his breaking point. His compassion for the dog resulted in gaining a needed companion.

While most students found parallel characteristics between Buck and Jason, a few students believed there were significant differences between them. For example, one student opined that “Buck was much smarter than Jason; Jason was just lucky.” Having some dissention enabled students to grapple with characterization on a deeper level. What did students really admire about the characters? What evidence did they have to support their ideas? What could they learn about the character of each protagonist based on his actions?

## Lessons Learned: Characterization

Having students analyze these two protagonists proved to be a meaningful component of this unit. The eighth graders were able to identify numerous connections between both characters and perhaps more carefully scrutinized each due to the comparison. For instance, examining a quality in one character required that students consider that quality for the other, necessitating more critical thinking.

Yet, we believe students could probe even deeper with their analysis of both protagonists. If we were to do this again, we would have students take more thoughtful notes about each character as they read the books. We would have them create dialogues with each other and take on the persona of either Buck or Jason. In this way, students would need to “know” their character well to engage in an honest conversation with each other. The assigned essays comparing

the two main characters were useful assessments, but more reflection about each protagonist prior to that activity could strengthen the outcome.

## Themes

After teacher-led discussions about what literary theme entails, how theme is more than a one word topic, and how theme is developed in movies and television shows by music, extended metaphors, or repeating scenes, students were able to tackle our objective to follow the progress of literary themes developed by London and Hobbs in each book. They immediately picked up on

one of the most obvious Darwinian themes: survival of the fittest! Students referred in conversations and in journals to survival of the fittest as “the law of the club, the law of the fang, and the law of the Yukon.” The law of the club meant a respect for the weapon, any weapon that could beat or maim. The law of the fang represented no fair play, once down, no getting up. The law of the Yukon was that only the strong, the fittest, survived the weather conditions and physical demands of the environment. Students found numerous examples of these “laws” in both books.

The extremes of nature, the greediness of people in their search for gold, and the ruthlessness as the strong sensed weaknesses in others proved easy themes for students to follow in discussions. Some talked about naturalism found in the need to amputate Charlie’s leg in *Jason’s Gold* (Hobbs, 139) and the cruelty of the dogs to Curly and any other dog who displayed weakness (London, 26) in *The Call of the Wild*.

Students connected both stories also in the theme of civilization versus primitivism. In an essay assignment, students were asked to discuss how Buck could be part of civilization while at the same time being pulled toward the wild. One student responded,

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Buck was able to develop and regress at the same time. He was developing his natural instincts while losing his domestic instincts. Instead of being polite and good natured, Buck was learning how to adapt to the Yukon wilderness. This is related to the theme of the story because the book was based on someone changing which is exactly what Buck was going through.

Another student noted that same draw to life in the wild in *Jason's Gold*. "I'd say that the people involved in this gold rush were very daring. They were willing to erase their previous lives and start out basically from scratch."

The loyalty exhibited by Jason and Buck became an obvious theme to students so that they easily recognized the authors' references to it. In a final essay, one student wrote, "Jason had a goal to accomplish, a stronger goal than others looking for gold. He was trying to find his brothers. This goal made him strive to survive." Students also recognized Buck's loyalty to Judge Miller in California's Santa Clara

Valley (London, 9) and to John Thornton as he pulled a 1000 pound sled frozen fast in the snow (London, 94).

In the newspaper articles mentioned earlier, students thoughtfully incorporated themes from the era. Their research gave them clear details to persuade readers to accept their theses. One female student's editorial on the harsh conditions in Alaska said, "In the Gold Rush, there is no need to be worried about freezing to death. A far worse killer comes in silence and with no warning. The most dangerous problem is gangrene." She continued

by describing the physical characteristics of gangrene and warned her readers to be careful, because once it starts, "there is no way of stopping it without amputation."

Other class activities addressing theme spanned across the entire unit. One that proved extremely popular with students asked them to follow a participant in the Iditarod, the Alaskan sled dog team race that goes from Anchorage to Nome over extreme winter conditions. In fact, our eighth grade teacher-partner chose to teach the unit in March because of the Iditarod events. Each student was assigned a musher to follow on the computer as that team made their way over the ice and snow. Students enjoyed the connections of the sled dogs to the dogs in both London's and Hobbs' books. They invited experts to the classroom who could talk about sled dogs as well as huskies, St. Bernard's, and sheep dogs. And they drew pictures of their impressions of King, Buck, Spitz, and other dogs they knew personally from their readings.

## Lessons Learned: Themes

Students could have used more time for reflections on their understanding of theme in their journals as well as in the discussions. They needed to include more concrete examples from both novels as they read. As teachers, we were reminded of the strong need to model what we meant by theme—consistently showing examples of how an idea was repeated through different scenes in the books. Theme can be a hard concept for eighth graders to grasp. This time we did not delve into the concept of mastery or control so pervasive in London's book, mostly because the students did not have time to study Nietzsche's view of the world as background. But we learned that students need that sense of primeval mastery to understand why Buck strives so hard in the wild to become master of the wolf pack.

## Style

In studying the concept of style we targeted the comparison of language of the historical times with today's words and phrases. Students were asked to enter in their journals words and phrases they did not know as they read both books. They noted connotations as they read and tried to figure out what the words and phrases meant in the nineteenth century context. Students discussed the phrases and terms and their importance to the "flavor" of the book, phrases like "that man reads water like a book," and

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“Klondike or bust,” learning how each author used these words to add personality to the historical fiction and adventure novels, and then they used terms like “klondicitis” in their own writings. Students quickly picked up on Hobbs’ style of writing: conversational, yet reflective of the historical time. They recognized the travelogue nature of the plot and the many references to Greek mythology, including Jason’s name and his search for his kind of gold: friendship and family. Students investigated the quest motif that Hobbs adopted by following Jason’s geographical travels and noting the trials that he had to overcome to reach his goals. From being thrown off the steamer to being robbed on the train to losing five days of efforts to cross over White Pass only to be so thwarted that he had to go over the Chilkoot Trail, Jason persevered and continued to search for his family and golden riches, becoming a stronger character as a result.

London’s writing style also offered many opportunities for students to add words and phrases to their wilderness journals: veranda, demesne, progeny, primordial, “no fair play. Once down, that was the end of you.” Passages like these that described Buck’s initiation into the savage world of the primitive “law of the club” provided glimpses into the naturalism so prominent in London’s work. They quickly learned that London pulled no punches when describing the brutality of the man in the red shirt or the savage death of Curly by a pack of dogs. The world of 1898 in the Yukon Territory was merciless, full of raw brutality, wild nature untamed by man.

Students examined Hobbs’ use of dialogue to develop a character, to demonstrate historical accuracy, and to make the historical aspects of his writing easier for readers. Students imitated the language in the newspaper articles they created about fictional and historical people who suffered from nature’s harshness, about gold seekers who dreamed of sudden wealth, and about practical information on successfully climbing Chilkoot Pass. Sample news stories featured Soapy Smith and his criminal activities, detailed illnesses that plagued the gold seekers, and resulted in spirited commentary about the economic consequences of railway decisions.

The creation of their newspapers to represent Alaskan news about the end of the nineteenth century meant students had to research significant people involved in making the history of the Gold Rush era,

had to find specific details about illnesses that plagued the adventurers, and had to incorporate details about life in the Territory, gore and all. They wrote editorials and letters to the editor about economic effects of the gold rush and addressed practical information about what supplies to take and which route was best to get there. One student even speculated that the gold rush was all a ruse by the government, a way to scam the public into believing that gold existed in the mountains. They wrote poetry and songs reflecting the styles of the authors that they included in their publication. And they drew cartoons with appropriate captions to

represent the historical era. Students captured the flavor that Hobbs and London exuded in their historical representations of the Gold Rush. They were able to incorporate that understanding of the language in their newspaper issues. With these hypothetical events, students captured the mindset of the gold seekers in their newspaper. This extended activity and its analysis helped them understand the styles and techniques used by London and Hobbs.

### **Lessons Learned: Style**

Discerning the style of any author is not easy. London and Hobbs are distinctly different, yet they offer good comparisons and insights into writing. The students felt Hobbs was “friendlier,” but they liked London’s realism. Being told from a dog’s perspective, *The Call of the Wild* anthropomorphizes Buck’s life so that he becomes as human as Jason.

To more fully grasp style, eighth graders need a rich understanding of the “wild” London infuses into his book, social Darwinism. So next time, we plan to

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delve more deeply into the philosophical understanding epitomized in the four-line poem which introduces the novel. We will pull specific passages from London and Hobbs to compare—Buck learning to fend for his food despite his genteel training (London, 35) and the gold seekers leaving Charlie in Jason’s care after amputating his leg (Hobbs, 94).

## Conclusions

In the end, students saw clear connections between the two books and between their authors. As teachers, we also reflected on the worth of the unit:

### 1. What did *Jason’s Gold* contribute to the reading and understanding of *The Call of the Wild*?

We found that students’ sense of history, the era of the Yukon Gold Rush, helped them learn setting, theme, characterization, and style in *The Call of the Wild* because they understood the historical, geographic, and social conditions present in *Jason’s Gold*. By reading *Jason’s Gold* first, students brought a wealth of knowledge to the reading of *The Call of the Wild*. They had successfully read a novel without stumbling over vocabulary and phrasing. They had cheered on Jason through his many challenges and setbacks, and carefully followed his journey north, learning the names of key locations and recognizing the conditions of the terrain in those places. Students were familiar with real people, real events, and real facts from this era. Upon reading *The Call of the Wild*, they didn’t have to grapple with these basic understandings. With London’s work they could focus their attention on the more challenging aspects of the book—vocabulary, style, theme, and interaction among characters.

### 2. Do students understand literary elements better by studying their use in two connected novels?

Characters, setting, theme and style are challenging aspects of reading for eighth graders, but we were very pleased with the way these two novels lent themselves to a clearer understanding of literary elements in novels. *Jason’s Gold*, a young adult novel by definition, lets students identify with a 14-year-old in New York and Seattle before the drastic change to the Yukon. Students could understand nature, man, and circumstances that precipitated events in the novel. Because they had read *Jason’s Gold* first, students’ expectations were set for *The Call of the Wild*. They recognized common characters, same

settings, similar themes, and comparable stylistic characteristics.

Our reflections fully justified using the two novels together! Our eighth grade language arts teacher plans to use these works as paired readings again. We suggest that the next time this unit is taught, the following aspects be added: more philosophical explanations, a stronger emphasis on the impact of the gold rush on the Native culture, the roles of women and children in creating history with the period’s events, and certainly integrating the social studies teacher and curriculum directly into the unit. Next time we want to make more connections to twenty-first century events and prevailing attitudes, e.g., mining and land use, re-introduction of the wolf (or other endangered animals) into an ecosystem, the de-civilization of man and animal in the wild. Both novels offer multiple teaching and learning opportunities. The lessons we all learned were richer for the paired reading of the two authors and their works.

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