

On the Interpretation of “the Law” in *The Law of Life*

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The Law of Life, a notable piece among Jack London’s Northland narratives, captivates readers with its brevity, conciseness, and profound ideas. Interpretations of “the law” vary widely, lacking a consensus. This paper aims to delve into “the law” from the perspectives of social Darwinism, fatalism, and the theory of three metamorphoses, which significantly influenced Jack London. By integrating these theories with the overall narrative, the profound meanings concealed within “the law” will be unearthed, and an increasingly suitable perspective on life and death will be discovered.

Keywords: Jack London, law, social Darwinism, three metamorphoses

Introduction

The Law of Life is one of the most famous short stories written by the outstanding American realist and naturalist novelist Jack London. Based on the life in the northern frontier, the novel tells the story of an elderly man, weak and frail, who is gradually approaching death after being abandoned by his tribe due to the famine. The reflection on “the law of life” throughout the entire process of the old man’s waiting for death is particularly profound and thought-provoking. This article aims to explore the term “law” and delve into the profound meanings hidden behind it from the perspectives of social Darwinism and Nietzsche’s theory of the three metamorphoses.

In 1859, Darwin proposed the evolutionary concept of “natural selection” in *The Origin of Species*, emphasizing the survival of the fittest. Darwin believed that species, through natural selection, preserve individuals with favorable variations and adaptations to the environment, while eliminating those that are not adapted to the environment. On this basis, Spencer further proposed social Darwinism, namely “survival of the strongest”, applying the law of “natural selection and survival of the fittest” in the biological world to society. He believed that society is also full of competition, with individuals, races, and nations competing for survival. He emphasized the survival rule of “the strongest” as “the fittest”.

Social Darwinism: Survival of the Strongest

As a representative writer of American naturalist literature, Jack London was greatly influenced by Darwin’s theory of evolution and Spencer’s social Darwinism. In *The Law of Life*, he described the protagonist, a former tribal leader named Koskush, recalling his life’s ups and downs and experiences before his death, and stated the first law of life: survival of the strongest.

This law is ubiquitous throughout the entire novel. Like Spencer introducing biological laws into society, Jack London used biological analogies while narrating human life. In the animal world, the most typical example

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is the old elk, a metaphor for the protagonist, who is left behind. No matter how brave and tenacious it is, it cannot escape the relentless pursuit of wolves and ultimately meets its end. The same goes for plants, as old and withered leaves are destined to fall, just as Koskoosh said to his son, “I am as a last years leaf, clinging lightly to the stem. The first breath that blows, and I fall” (London, 2001, p. 95). In humans, the law of “survival of the strongest” is even more vividly displayed. On one hand, people must undergo the test of time, and old age and weakness will ultimately be abandoned by the world of the strong. Koskoosh was brave and fearless when he was young, commanding awe as a tribal chief. However, as time passed, he became old and weak, with declining vision and sluggish responses, ultimately abandoned by his family, just as he had abandoned his father in the past. On the other hand, people must contend with harsh external environments, including climate, natural disasters, geographical dangers, diseases, wolves, other Indian tribes, and whites. Only by overcoming these challenges, can one become strong and survive. Otherwise, one will become a victim of nature or society.

The law of “survival of the strongest” is highly realistic and does not shift based on individual will. As stated in the novel, “Nature is ruthless to the flesh of creatures. She does not care about specific individuals. She cares about humanity, the species of man” (London, 2001, p. 83). This is a cruel law that, to a certain extent, reflects the author’s helplessness towards the world and life.

Fatalism: Death as Inevitability

The worldview of fatalism has a long history, tracing back to Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilizations thousands of years ago. Later, this ideology spread to the West and eventually throughout the world. Its core belief is that there are mysterious and inevitable destinies inherent in all things in the universe, and death stands out as one of the most mysterious and awe-inspiring of these destinies. Death is unavoidable, yet it cannot be foreseen or experienced in advance by humans, which adds to its mystique.

In *The Law of Life*, Jack London elaborates extensively on death.

Nature assigns the same task to every individual. He will die if he fails to complete it; he will also die if he succeeds. Nature does not care. There are plenty of people who are obedient and compliant, but in this matter, what lasts forever is humanity’s “obedience and compliance,” not the individual who complies. (London, 2001, p. 235)

Speaking personally,

he is but a fleeting passerby, soon to vanish. Nature does not mind. She assigns only one task to life and establishes only one law for it. The task of life is the perpetuation of the whole, and the law of life is the death of the individual. (London, 2001, p. 235)

Here, the author points out the second law of life: For individuals, death is inevitable and the ultimate outcome.

To better illustrate the irresistible fact of death as an inevitable destiny, Jack London offers a vivid explanation using the fate of a woman throughout her life as an example. No matter how young and beautiful a woman once was, she cannot escape the predetermined task assigned to her by nature. From initially flirting with men to marrying at the peak of her youthful charm, then bearing children, cooking, and working, her beauty fades, she ages, her movements slow, her vision diminishes, until ultimately she is left on the snow with a small bundle of matches, awaiting the arrival of death. This is the fate of women, and also the author’s hint at the future destiny of Sikatooha, the granddaughter of Koskush. Despite her current youth, beauty, carefree demeanor, and

preoccupation with men, one day she will repeat the story of other women, becoming a wife, a mother, an old woman, an abandoned person, and eventually facing death.

It is not only the aged or weak who face death; even the strong cannot escape their fatal destiny. Jingha, the greatest hunter in the tribe and undeniably strong, also falls in his battle against fate, plunging into an ice hole and freezing to death.

Although the concept of fatalism carries a strong sense of tragedy, compared to the law of "survival of the fittest", the outcome of "death as inevitability" is more humane because everyone is equal before fate. Koskush, in his final moments of life, suddenly gains enlightenment after many reflections. Regardless of how glorious or unfortunate one's past, the ultimate result is death, which is also one of the reasons he gives up fighting the wolf. In his view, clinging too much to life has lost its meaning. "What does it matter if a specific individual dies? Isn't the law of life that death always follows the completion of life's task?" (London, 2001, p. 239) The fate of death is no longer a threat but a generous gift from nature. In contrast, the game rule of "survival of the fittest" is much colder and harsher because while it advocates for individuals to become strong, it overlooks an important point: Both the weak and the strong have the right to live. The criteria for judging "strong" and "weak" are often limited to physical strength, temperament, ability, etc., excluding the equally indispensable factor of moral character. This makes the law of "survival of the fittest" somewhat unfair.

Nietzsche's Theory of the Three Metamorphoses: Eternal Recurrence

Apart from social Darwinism, Jack London's works were deeply influenced by Nietzsche's philosophy of the superman, especially his doctrine of three metamorphoses. This theory, originating from Nietzsche's masterpiece *Zarathustra's Speech*, depicts three stages of spiritual growth: the camel, the lion, and the child (Nietzsche, 2007, p. 90). In Nietzsche's portrayal, the camel symbolizes perseverance and endurance, representing the initial state of human spirit, which, though burdened, lacks subjective initiative. To break free from these shackles, the camel must transform into a lion, symbolizing vitality and rebellious spirit. The lion bravely challenges tradition, strives for freedom, and becomes the master of its own destiny. However, after the old world is destroyed by the lion, the spirit still needs to continue seeking a home. Thus, the lion transforms into a child. The child, with its most natural and pure nature, reshapes the world according to its own will (Du, 2009, p. 87), symbolizing the rebirth of the spirit. This series of transformations in the spirit is precisely a portrayal of the entire process of eternal recurrence.

Jack London skillfully integrated the doctrine of three metamorphoses into *The Law of Life*, showcasing the process through the life journey of the protagonist, Koskoosh. Through this process, the author revealed the second law hidden behind life: the eternal recurrence of life. In his youth, Koskoosh endured the weight of life silently like a camel, accepting others' teachings. As he matured, he gradually awakened, boldly rebelling against old shackles like a lion, pursuing true spiritual independence and becoming a strong figure in the tribe. However, the end of life inevitably approached, and Koskoosh, facing death, abandoned struggle and peacefully returned to the state of a child, completing the purification and sublimation of his spirit.

In fact, the law of eternal recurrence runs through the protagonist's entire life, even in the fleeting moments of being abandoned by his tribe and waiting for death alone. His spirit underwent a transformation through three forms. Initially, he was passive like a camel; facing abandonment by his tribe and limited resources, he could only recall the past in solitude and await death. Nevertheless, he still harbored the rebellious spirit of a lion, recalling scenes of young deer fighting wolves and waving a burning branch for a final struggle on the brink of

death. But as the wolves closed in, his spirit ascended, no longer clinging to life, but embracing nature and his innate nature. “Koskoosh dropped his head wearily upon his knees” (London, 2001, p. 102) “just like a fetus in its mother’s womb” (Mao, 2010, p. 106), representing the highest stage of the three metamorphoses of the spirit—the child. This was not just the end of life, but the beginning of a new one, a transcendence, a pursuit of the essence of life. The rule of eternal recurrence shows that death is the continuation of life, and life is also the continuation of death, as Nietzsche said, “He who has lost the world gains his own” (Nietzsche, 2007, p. 86).

Through the archetype of the three spiritual metamorphoses, Jack London reveals the law of “eternal recurrence” in life. This law shatters the cold and utilitarian view of “survival of the strongest” and endows life with a warm and romantic hue. In the life of Koskoosh, we can observe the constant recurrence and rebirth of life, whether it be the transition from a camel to a lion or from a lion to a child, all representing the process of life pursuing self-transcendence and purification.

Conclusion

Through the story of an old Indian man who was abandoned by his tribe and awaited death, *The Law of Life* explores the eternal topic of “life and death” in human history. By revealing various laws of life, the author enables us to view life and death comprehensively from multiple perspectives. Although life is indeed worthy of being loved and cherished, when we face death directly, we might as well take it lightly and downplay it. Like the protagonist Koskoosh, we should face it calmly and boldly, seeking a kind of eternal transcendence that returns to the essence of life. This is also the highest realm of the existence of all things.

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