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

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.

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.
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 had 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, goodnatured, 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.

Having some dissent 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? 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 dissent 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 personas 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 themes entail, 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 giving 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 senses 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 The Call of the Wild. Others talked about symbolism found in the fangs of the wolves in Jason's Gold. Students noted similar qualities when describing Jason. They portrayed him as determined, intelligent, and hard working. One student wrote,

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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,

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.”
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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 in 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 teachers, we were reminded to model by--them--the strong need to modulate 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 privalmal mastery to understand why Buck strives so hard in the wild to become master of the wolf pack.

Style

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 "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 "klondicitia" in their own writings.

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 were asked to read the phrases and terms and their importance to the "flavor" of the book, phrases like "that man reads water like a book," and "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 "klondicitia" 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, demense, progeny, primordial, "no fair play. Once down, that was the end of you." Passages like these 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.

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 delve more deeply into the style 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 endowed 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.

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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 learned when to use the words and phrases they encountered 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, gone 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 to. One student even speculated that the gold rush was all a ruse by the government, a way to scan 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 endowed 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.

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. 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. The lessons we all learned were richer for the paired reading of the two authors and their works.

Dr. Carolyn Lott teaches library media and conducts research on children's and young adult literature as well as integrative curriculum.

Dr. Stephanie Wasta teaches elementary/middle school social studies methods and foundations courses. Her research interests include best practices for integrating trade books with social studies curricula.

Works Cited


I learned a great deal about the Klondike Gold Rush, but surprisingly little about Jack London. This felt more like an entry in the "You Wouldn't Want to Be" series—and, to be clear, I definitely wouldn't want to be a gold prospector! Transitions between chapters were clunky and the writing was somewhat ho-hum. Quotes often lacked attribution, and it became clear from the author's note that much of what he'd written about Jack's brutal Klondike experience was actually supposition. It's 1897 and gold has been discovered in the rushing creeks and streams of the Yukon Territory of Canada. A 21-year-old Jack London frustrated by mounting rejections for his short stories and poetry, boards a steamship in San Francisco and travels North in search of gold. For this gold rush math worksheet, students first read a one page text about the history of the Klondike gold rush then answer 10 math word problems using the information in the text. This is related to the book The Call of the Wild. Get Free Access See Review. Students discuss the poem "The Cremation of Sam McGee" and the Yukon Gold Rush. Get Free Access See Review. Lesson Planet. Primary Sources in the Classroom: A Gold Rush Perspective. For Teachers 8th - 10th. Students develop and hone their historical inquiry and analytical abilities. The Spell of the Yukon: Jack London and the Klondike Gold Rush. July 13, 2006. 9 minute read. Volunteers dismantled the structure and moved it to Dawson. Half of the logs went to Jack London Square in Oakland and the other half was used to construct a replica of the cabin in Dawson City. Today the cabin is the focus of the Jack London Interpretive Centre, where visitors can learn about the author and his life in the Yukon. For London did discover gold in the Klondike. Later, he would write: "It was in the Klondike I found myself. There nobody talks. Episodes. Gold Rush - Season 11 Gold Rush - Season 10 Gold Rush - Season 9 Gold Rush - Season 8 Gold Rush - Season 7 Gold Rush - Season 6 Gold Rush - Season 3 Gold Rush - Season 2, Nov 3, 8pm. The Fast And The Furious. Parker's new strategy creates an engineering challenge and tempers flare. Rick pulls in his first gold of the season and Fred calls for backup. Nov 13, 9pm. The Klondike Gold Rush was a migration by an estimated 100,000 prospectors to the Klondike region of the Yukon, in north-western Canada, between 1896 and 1899. Gold was discovered there by local miners on August 16, 1896, when news reached Seattle and San Francisco the following year, it triggered a stampede of prospectors. Some became wealthy, but the majority went in vain. It has been immortalized in films, literature, and photographs.