Objectives

1. Students will read and listen to an excerpt from Jack London’s classic novella *The Call of the Wild*, with the opportunity for extension to the full text.

2. Students will respond to the text through writing and discussion.

3. Practice and reinforce the following Grade 8 ELA Common Core Standards for reading literature, writing, and speaking and listening:

   **READING LITERATURE** – RL.8.1-7, 10
   **WRITING** – W.8.1-9a, 10
   **SPEAKING AND LISTENING** – SL.8.1-6

Time

130 minutes (with up to an additional 180 minutes of extension possibilities)

Materials

SyncTV Premium Lesson on Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild*

Overview

Jack London’s best-known fiction (*The Call of the Wild, White Fang, To Build a Fire*) is set in the Yukon Territory, including this excerpt from perhaps his most famous work, *The Call of the Wild*. Though his life was short (1876 – 1916), London found both critical and commercial success as a writer during his lifetime, as his stories were published in magazines and serialized around the globe. *The Call of the Wild* explores the themes most prevalent in London’s fiction: the force of nature, and the irrepressible animal instinct that lies inside both man and animal. Close examination of this excerpt will offer students the opportunity to engage with the language and themes of an enduring piece of popular literature, and write thoughtful, informed and textually-rooted responses consistent with the ELA Common Core Standards for the eighth grade.
Background (10 minutes)

1. **Watch the Preview (SL.8.1).** As a group, watch the video preview of the premium lesson. After viewing, use the following questions to spur a discussion:

   a. What kind of mood does the music and imagery in the preview create? Make inferences, based on the music and imagery, about what kind of story this will be.

   b. What do you know about the Klondike Gold Rush? What can you infer? Why do you think dogs were being sold for labor during this time?

   c. What kinds of skills and instincts are necessary for survival in nature? How are they different than the skills and instincts necessary for survival in man-made society? How are they similar?

Extension (additional 60 minutes)

d. **Research (W.8.7-9).** Have students research the life and works of Jack London. Have them focus primarily on how his life informed the kinds of stories and topics he wrote about. Assign a short written response in which students speculate on the connection between London’s personal life and his written work, noting any similarities between the two.

e. **Using Technology (SL.8.4-6).** Conduct a podcast interview with Jack London discussing the author’s time spent living in the Yukon Territory during the Klondike Gold Rush. Ask London a series of questions about his daily life, his struggles, and the challenges he may have faced.

f. **Discuss (SL.8.1).** Do you think all fiction has an autobiographical element? How might an author’s imagination blend with real-life experiences in a story?

Engaging the Text (120 minutes)

2. **Read the Text (30 minutes)**

   a. **Read and Annotate (RL.8.1-4).** Have students read and annotate the excerpt. If you have a projector, you might choose to model annotation skills to the class using the beginning of the excerpt as an example. If students are completing this as a homework assignment, ask them to write any questions they have into the annotation tool—these questions are visible to you after the students submit their writing assignments or beforehand if you use the “Mimic” function to access the students’ accounts.

   b. **Discuss (SL.8.1, 3).** Have students get into small groups or pairs and briefly discuss the questions and inferences they had while reading. As a class, discuss the following: What are the different conflicts we encounter in this excerpt? Who is fighting whom? What are the different characters’ motivations?

Extension (additional 20 minutes)

c. **Listen and Discuss (SL.8.1-2).** As a class, listen to the audio reading of the text. Ask students to share how their understanding of the text changed after listening. What additional images came to mind? What words did the author use to develop the setting?
d. **Comprehend** *(RL.8.1-4)*. Have students complete the multiple-choice questions. Collect papers or discuss answers as a class.

e. **Visualize** *(ELL)*. As a class, have students illustrate different scenes from the excerpt, using the descriptions in the excerpt to determine their illustrations. Have students write a sentence of description underneath each of their respective illustrations.

3. **Watch SyncTV (30 minutes)**

   a. **Watch**. Either watch the SyncTV discussion as a class or ask students to watch it on their individual computers.

   b. **Focus** *(SL.8.1, 3 and RL.8.2)*. From 1:10-1:45, the model students engage in a discussion of paradox, and in particular, the paradox found in the excerpt. Re-watch this discussion, paying careful attention to this concept. What other paradoxes can you think of?

   c. **Focus** *(SL.8.1, 3 and RL.8.2-4)*. Between 3:32-4:09, the students analyze the fourth paragraph of the excerpt, specifically regarding its implications about how man and animal are connected by the natural instinct of “blood lust.” Pay close attention to this analysis.

   d. **Focus** *(SL.8.1, 3 and RL.8.2-4)*. Use the portion of the episode from 7:45-8:15 to model how to do a close reading of a particular passage from a text – in this case, the last line of the excerpt. Consider how the model students draw inferences and closely consider the meaning of specific words and phrases.

   e. **Discuss** *(SL.8.1, 3-4 and RL.8.1-4)*. After watching the model discussion, have a conversation with the class about the ideas discussed in the SyncTV episode. What new thoughts do they have after hearing the students’ discussion? Next, divide students into small groups (3-4 students). Move around the room monitoring groups as students follow the SyncTV episode as a model to discuss some of the following questions:

   i. How does London imbue animal characters with human traits? Point to specific passages wherein the animals in the story are personified. What words and language does London use to accomplish this?

   ii. What is the narrator speaking of when he mentions “an ecstasy that marks the summit of life, and beyond which life cannot rise”? What is the “sheer surging of life, the tidal wave of being”? Paraphrase and simplify the meanings of these three quotes.

   iii. What, in your opinion, is the primary theme of this excerpt? Summarize the thematic meaning of this excerpt in one or two sentences. What statement is London trying to make?

   iv. Buck, as we know from the preview, is a domesticated dog thrust into the brutal wilderness. Are dogs ever completely domesticated? Or are they innately wild by nature? Infer London’s thoughts on this matter and compare them with your own.

   v. What about people? Are we also driven by animal instincts? What truly separates people from animals? Again, speculate on London’s thoughts and compare them with your own.
vi. What is the “complete forgetfulness that one is alive”? How can anyone forget they are alive? Paraphrase and simplify the meaning of this quote.

Extension (additional 50 minutes)

f. Blasts (W.8.6, 9). Give students a Blast assignment where they ponder and write about other paradoxes they’ve encountered. Use the paradox at the heart of this excerpt as a framework: i.e., We feel the most alive when we forget we are alive. Encourage creativity and critical thinking in completing this assignment. If students are stuck, share some of your own as examples.

g. Discuss (SL.8.1). What is the “call of the wild”? Do you think you have ever experienced this so-called feeling? When have you feel the most wild and free? What activities, hobbies, etc. make you feel the most alive?

4. Think (10 minutes)

a. Respond (W.8.1, 4). Ask students to read the “Think” questions, watch the corresponding video clips, and respond to the questions, either in class or for homework.

5. Write (50 minutes)

a. Discuss (SL.8.1). Read the prompt you have chosen for students, and then solicit questions regarding the prompt or the assignment expectations. Whichever prompt you have chosen, make sure you are clear about the assignment expectations and the rubric by which you and the other students will be evaluating them.

b. Organize (RL.8.1-5, 10 and W.8.1-2, 5). Ask students to go back and annotate the text with the prompt in mind. They should be organizing their thoughts and the points they’ll address in their writing as they make annotations. If you’ve worked on outlining or other organizational tools for writing, this is a good place to apply them.

c. Write (W.8.1-2, 4-6, 8-10). Have students go through the writing process of planning, revising, editing, and publishing their writing responses.

d. Review (W.8.4-6). Use the StudySync “Review” feature to have students complete one to two evaluations of their peers’ work based on your chosen review rubric. Have the students look at and reflect upon the peer evaluations of their own writing. What might you do differently in a revision? How might you strengthen the writing and the ideas?

Extension (additional 50 minutes)

e. Write (W.8.1-2, 4-6, 9-10). For homework, have students write an essay using one of the prompts you did not choose to do in class. Students should publish their responses online.

f. Write Creatively (W.8.3, 9). Write a short story about a time in your life you have felt a “call of the wild” similar to what’s discussed in the excerpt. What were you doing and what made you feel this way? Based on this experience, do you agree with London, that we feel most alive when we forget when we are alive?
9. **Making Connections** (*SL.8.1 and RL.8.1-2*). What is atavism? (The return of an older natural trait.) How is this concept related to this excerpt from *The Call of the Wild*? Do you believe atavism applies to humans as well? Why/why not?
SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Key Vocabulary

1. primordial (adj.) – ancient, existing since time immemorial
2. vexation (n.) – the state of being anxious or irritated
3. insidious (adj.) – harmful or dangerous in a subtle, not easily noticed way
4. solidarity (n.) – unity, togetherness
5. placatingly (adv.) – in a way that attempts to appease or make less angry
6. swagger (v.) – to walk in a self-assured way
7. bedlam (n.) – a situation of chaos and disorder
8. ecstasy (n.) – a state of great delight, happiness, euphoria
9. exultantly (adv.) – done with great happiness or excitement
10. paradox (n.) – a situation that is made up of two directly contradictory elements

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. Francois is ___________.
   a. a hunting dog
   b. the man who leads the expedition
   c. one of the older dogs
   d. Buck’s canine rival

2. What is said to have caused the “great trouble and vexation”?
   a. the harsh weather conditions
   b. Buck’s incitement of the other dogs
   c. Spitz’ inability to follow orders
   d. all of the above

3. Spitz is ___________.
   a. the leader of the pack
   b. now more often disobeyed by the dogs
   c. a rival of Buck’s
   d. all of the above

4. “His lash was always singing among the dogs, but it was of small avail.”

   What action is literally happening in the underlined text?
   a. He is whipping the dogs
   b. He is singing to the dogs
   c. He is looking sternly at the dogs
   d. He is howling at the dogs

5. In the excerpt, Buck feels most alive while ___________.
   a. clashing with Spitz
   b. starting a fight among the other dogs
   c. chasing a rabbit
d. running in the harness

6. According to the excerpt, which of the following would NOT experience the “ecstasy of living”?
   a. artists
   b. wild dogs
   c. soldiers
   d. pets

7. “All that stirring of old instincts which at stated periods drives men out from the sounding cities to forest and plain to kill things by chemically propelled leaden pellets…”

   The men described in this passage are ____________.
   a. hunting
   b. farming
   c. fighting a war
   d. scavenging

8. “…but Buck was too clever ever again to be caught red-handed.”

   A good synonym for red-handed is ____________.
   a. dead
   b. in the act
   c. easily
   d. fighting

9. The title The Call of the Wild figuratively refers to ____________.
   a. the sounds animals make
   b. wild, primordial instincts
   c. the Klondike Gold Rush
   d. our fear of the wilderness

10. Generally speaking, the “summit of life” in paragraph 5 is experienced when ____________.
    a. acting on pure adrenaline and instinct
    b. fighting for survival
    c. being aware of one’s own body and mind
    d. achieving success in one’s pursuits

**Answer Key**

1. B
2. B
3. D
4. A
5. C
6. D
7. A
8. B
9. B
10. A
Further Assignments

1. For a longer reading assignment, have students read the entirety of Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild*. Have them make annotations and/or keep a reading journal as they read the text, paying close attention to themes that develop over the course of the text. (*RL.8.1–6, 10*)

2. Read *To Build a Fire*, Jack London’s most famous and often-anthologized short story. Having read this and *The Call of the Wild*, what are London’s apparent interests and obsessions? What similarities to you see between *To Build a Fire* and *The Call of the Wild*? In an essay response, compare and contrast these two works. (*RL.8.9 and W.8.1–2, 9*)

3. *The Call of the Wild* has been adapted several times for the screen. Watch at least one of these filmed versions, and discuss how the filmmakers faced the challenges of adapting a novella in which the action is primarily internal. What larger lesson does this exemplify about the differences between written and visual storytelling? (*SL.8.1–3 and RL.8.7*)

4. In an introduction to the Modern Library version of *The Call of the Wild*, writer E.L. Doctorow says the message of London’s story is rooted in Darwinism. What did he mean by this statement, and why is this so? In a short essay response, discuss Darwin’s theories and how they play out over the course of *The Call of the Wild*. (*W.8.7–9 and RL.8.1–2*)

5. Have students create a visual timeline of Jack London’s life using computer or iPad software. Incorporate images of London and places he lived; include the important events in his life from birth to death and the works for which he was most well-known. (*SL.8.5 and W.8.7–8*)

6. Debate either or both of the following topics: 1. Can animals truly be domesticated? 2. Can people ever escape their animal nature? Define any vocabulary words students are unfamiliar with. (*SL.8.1, 3-4 and ELL*)