ANALYSIS OF JACK LONDON'S NOVELS

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Jack London's (January 12, 1876 – November 22, 1916) fame as a writer came about largely through his ability to realistically interpret humanity's struggle in a hostile environment. Early in his career, London realized that he had no talent for invention, that in his writing he would have to be an interpreter of the things that are, rather than a creator of the things that might be. Accordingly, he drew his plots, characters, themes, and settings from real-life experiences and published accounts.

London's career as a novelist began shortly after the turn of the twentieth century with the publication of A Daughter of the Snows. It ended nineteen novels later with the posthumous publication of The Assassination Bureau, Ltd. in 1963. The novels vary widely in length, subject matter, and (especially) artistic quality, for while London could write bold, violent,Analysis • Jack London's fame as a writer came about largely through his ability to realistically interpret humanity's struggle in a hostile environment. Early in his career, London realized that he had no talent for invention, that in his writing he would have to be an interpreter of the things that are, rather than a creator of the things that might be. Accordingly, he drew his plots, characters, themes, and settings from real-life experiences and published accounts. London's career as a novelist began shortly after the turn of the twentieth century with the publication of A Daughter of the Snows. It ended nineteen novels later with the posthumous publication of The Assassination Bureau, Ltd. in 1963. The novels vary widely in length, subject matter, and (especially) artistic quality, for while London could write bold, violent, and sometimes primitive short stories of immense power, depicting the frontier environment and the human struggle within it in memorable fashion, his novels often suffered from weakness of structure and excessive didacticism. London's failure of invention, never a significant problem in his short stories, all too often surfaced in his longer works. Some critics have complained that a few of his novels (such as Burning Daylight, for example) are not novels at all, but merely strings of short stories hung together by the merest contrivance.

London's novels characteristically contain at least one of three different settings: the Canadian northland, where he began his literary apprenticeship; the primitive South Seas and Hawaii, where his career began anew following a short decline; and the California wilderness—particularly the Sonoma Valley—where London retreated during the last years of his life.

Each novel also generally contains a philosophical focus. Popular at the time were Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, as interpreted by Herbert Spencer; Friedrich Nietzsche's version of the superman, and, much later, the new psychology of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, as well as Karl Marx's theories of a new social order. All fired London's imagination and provided fuel for his characters and plots, and their presence—particularly London's version of the Darwinian "survival of the fittest" motif—lends credence to London's claim for membership in the naturalistic school of fiction

The Call of the Wild

London was at the height of his powers when he wrote The Call of the Wild. He was dealing with the kind of subject matter, theme, and setting with which he was most comfortable. Written with vigor and intensity, the novel was intended originally only as a companion story to "Batard," an earlier short story. The story literally "got away from him," as he explained in a letter to a friend, and he was forced to expand it to its present length. The book was written shortly after his return from the slums of London. Wanting to escape the degradation and poverty he had witnessed there, London returned to the clean, frozen, beautiful world of the North, where the struggle for survival was elemental, uncomplicated, and fierce. The story is that of a dog, Buck, who is kidnapped from his home on a California ranch and taken to the Yukon, where he is forced to pull heavily laden sleds for inhumane masters. In order to survive, Buck must adapt, falling back on primitive instincts. With domesticity stripped from him, Buck learns the ways of his ancestors; he learns the law of the club—that he will be beaten but will survive. Gradually, as he completes his initiation into the primitive, Buck learns to respond. He learns the law of the fang: that he must be quick to use his own fangs, before others use theirs on him. By adapting to his new environment, Buck survives, learns the instincts of his forebears, and finally, hears the true call of the wild.

Incredibly, London's most successful novel was the one least understood by its author. He did not foresee its popularity, and he sold it outright to his publisher for two thousand dollars. He did not like its title, which now has become a recognizable phrase in the English language, nor did he understand the most powerful element in the book—the human allegory.

In The Call of the Wild, London was able to incorporate to good advantage the popular notion of the fierce Darwinian struggle for survival of the fittest. Curiously, he modified the Darwinian theme slightly. Buck must struggle to survive, but his survival is not predicated upon ultimate triumph. He must learn how to use his instincts, he must learn to be a good sled dog, but he need not become the team leader in order to survive. Struggle for its own sake also appears in The Call of the Wild and in other London novels. The team does not have to kill the snowshoe rabbit; at the time they are sleek and well fed. Yet, they chase after the animal anyway for the sheer sport of the kill. Struggle for its own sake reappears in The Iron Heel, Martin Eden, and The Valley of the Moon

The Sea-Wolf

The Sea-Wolf drew on London's youthful adventures in the sealing grounds off Japan. The novel concerns the survival of upper-class Humphrey Van Weyden, a man who finds himself, through means beyond his control, aboard The Ghost, a sealing schooner on its way to Japan. Van Weyden soon finds that the captain of the schooner, Wolf Larsen, has created a hell-ship, filled with brutality and sordidness, where even the ship's practical purpose—to hunt seals—is lost in the misery of mere survival. Van Weyden survives this environment because, like Buck, he is able to adapt to it, learning new codes of survival, drawing upon unknown instincts, and using to best advantage all the benefits of his upbringing and status: intelligence, optimism, and a capacity to love. Van Weyden's growth is the focus of the novel.

If Van Weyden survives because he, too, has learned the law of the club and the fang, the ship's captain, Wolf Larsen, dies precisely because he cannot adapt. At least, that was London's intention, but it was lost upon many early critics. "I attacked Nietzsche and his super-man idea," London wrote to Mary Austin. "Lots of people read The Sea-Wolf, [but] no one discovered that it was an attack upon the super-man philosophy."

The Sea-Wolf is a fine example of literary naturalism. Larsen, a sensitive, intelligent, domineering man, treats his crew with arrogance. He has no inhibitions and also no friends. He is alone, and his life lacks purpose and direction. His aloneness and alienation from nature and from humankind, and, in fact, from himself, lead to his almost inevitable destruction. Without Van Weyden's ability to adapt, Larsen dies.

If London fails to convince his reader that Larsen died because he was a superman, perhaps it is because London did not fully subscribe to the idea himself. The world is full of supermen—London fancied himself one in many ways—and the socialist alternative that London supported intellectually was one he could not accept emotionally. This conflict between the superman idea and socialism erupts full-scale in Martin Eden, when London again takes Nietzsche to task.

Although The Sea-Wolf may have failed to convey its point to the critics, it did not fail to capture the fancy of the reading public. Next to The Call of the Wild, it was (and is) London's most popular book, and it gave the author the financial security he so desperately needed.

The last third of the book is concerned not only with the powerful element of Larsen's degeneration (which Ambrose Bierce called "unforgettable") but also with the introduction of Maud Brewster. London generally had trouble with female characters in his fiction—his editors demanded strict Victorian morals, and London was happy to oblige—and following Maud's introduction, the book is reduced to a sentimental shambles. Although the love story, in great part, ensured the critical failure of the book, it also ensured the book's popular success. As soon as Maud steps aboard, Van Weyden reverts to his earlier stature, as if wholly unaffected by the events that have thus transpired: His growth and adaptation are cast aside. The contradictions of The Sea-Wolf mirror the contradictions of London's own times. The novel is successful in depicting the turn-of-the-century society in which London lived, which was shaking off the morals and ways of the nineteeth century yet still was holding on to vestiges and customs of the earlier time.

White Fang

If The Call of the Wild is a novel about a dog who reacquaints himself with his ancestral instincts and learns survival by adaptation, White Fang is both its sequel and reverse. White Fang is the story of a wolfdog brought from the Alaskan wilderness to California civilization. Just as Buck used his civilized intelligence to

survive, so White Fang uses his primitive strength and endurance to survive in a new environment—the world of civilized humanity. Environment is London's primary focus in this novel, as he traces the changes in the animal's behavior as it moves first from the wolf pack to an American Indian village, then to the white settler, and, finally, to the Santa Clara Valley in California. White Fang is tamed by love, and he successfully makes the transition from savage wolf to loving house pet. Although the book does not have the power of The Call of the Wild, it does show White Fang's struggle with nature as represented by Native Americans, dogs, white men, and finally, after critical injuries suffered while defending his new benevolent master, death itself.

London was intensely interested in sociology and sociological studies. He wrote one himself, The People of the Abyss (1903), and planned another one about the slums of New York City. Much of his interest in the subject can be explained by his belief in socialism, an answer to the problems many sociologists revealed. Thus it is not surprising that he would write The Iron Heel, a novel espousing a Marxist solution.

The Iron Heel

Like The Valley of the Moon, The Iron Heel is a novel set in the California wilderness. The similarities end there, however, for while London would later see his agrarian vision as a solution to the economic troubles of his time, in 1905, he still believed that a socialist revolution was necessary and inevitable. He documented it in this futuristic novel of social science fiction—a twentieth century vision of blood, fire, and destruction.

London used a number of complicated plot structures to convey his point in The Iron Heel, and, as usual when dealing with fiction of greater length, he was not entirely successful in sustaining the plot or action. The Iron Heel is supposed to be a copy of the Everhard manuscript, a fragment of a paper hidden away by Avis Everhard. This paper was supposed to have been found, some seven centuries later, edited by Anthony Meredith, and then brought to publication as The Iron Heel. Covering the period 1912-1913 when the oligarchy rises to power and destroys all forms of free speech and opposition, the paper tells of Everhard's struggle against the oppression and his final flight underground, where he continues the fight, sometimes, as in The Call of the Wild, for the sheer sport of it. The novel reaches a bloody climax in Chicago when the mob is slaughtered by the Iron Heel mercenaries.

As might be expected, London's novel was not particularly popular with the reading public. His vision was not accepted by the socialists, either, perhaps because they sensed that the book was written as a halfhearted attempt at reaffirmation. The struggle between man and nature, so convincingly portrayed in The Call of the Wild, becomes a struggle between man and man, oppressed and oppressor, and even London was unsure who would really win the battle.

Martin Eden

While sailing around the world on his yacht Snark, London attempted a novel to bolster his career, which was sagging badly in 1907. The result, Martin Eden, was a profoundly moving novel, but also, as literary critic Franklin Walker would later note, a most puzzling work. Called alternately London's finest and his worst novel, Martin Eden was meant as another attack on individualism and the Nietzschean superhero. As in The Sea-Wolf, London was only partially able to convey this intention. The rags-to-riches motif runs so strongly through the book that the reader is compelled to identify and sympathize with Martin, a lowly seaman, who without education or culture is thrown into the world of the educated and cultured. His introduction to their world fires his mind, and he yearns for their sophisticated ways, their knowledge, and the woman who brings this world to him. Like London himself, Martin decides that the path to social betterment lies through his writing talent, and the novel masterfully describes Martin's (and London's) literary apprenticeship, early failure, and final success. Martin Eden is a Bildungsroman—a novel of education. It employs the potent cultural myth of rags to riches and masterfully depicts Martin's painful transition from the innocence of unknowing to the power of knowledge. As Martin grows and learns, he finds himself embroiled in the battle of the Iron Heel, pitting man against man, oppressed against oppressor. London offers Martin the key to salvation through the poet Brissenden—socialism—but Martin rejects it, and in so doing seals his fate. By the time Martin's road to success ends, it is too late. Without a reason for living, Martin rejects all that he has sought and, finally, takes his own life.so by booking passage on an ocean liner and then committing suicide by drowning in the sea.

London returns to the theme of The Call of the Wild in Martin Eden, with one peculiar twist. Like Buck, Martin begins life unconscious of himself. He does not know that his grammar is imperfect, that his dress is slovenly, or that his manners are uncouth until Ruth Morse educates him. As he learns about himself, he

becomes self-conscious. No longer do the instincts that Buck uses to adapt and survive work for Martin. Unable to adapt to his new environment, Martin returns to the only thing he knows—the sea—and, fulfilling the paradox of knowing and unknowing, dies.

Martin Eden is a profoundly moving work of imaginative realism, but, like much of London's longer work, it suffers from an uneven structure and sometimes clumsy expression. The major flaw of the book, however, is London's failure to convey his point. Readers are so caught by the potent myth, so sympathetic toward Martin and his fight to the top, that they cannot understand Martin's almost inevitable death and feel cheated by it. There is too much of Jack London in Martin Eden, too much of London's own confusion over individualism versus Marxism, to carry the novel, and so it fails, as London did, in the attempt.

The Valley of the Moon

In a May, 1911, letter to editor Roland Phillips, London outlined his plan for The Valley of the Moon: The theme of the book would be back to the land, a likely motif, for it paralleled London's own life story. The agrarian vision, London wrote, would be accomplished by a man and a woman, both wage earners, who meet and grow to love each other in the confines of a big city. Hard times befall them, and the woman, in an attempt to regain the good times they had had together, leads them both on a pilgrimage through California that ends, finally, in Jack London's own valley, the Valley of the Moon.

As London matured, he saw a return to the soil as the solution to the great economic problems of the age. He used this agrarian vision to advantage in his writings and also on the acres of his own expanding ranch. The theme runs through much of his work, including not only The Valley of the Moon but also Burning Daylight and The Little Lady of the Big House.

To solve the problems of the city, Saxon and Billy, the two characters in The Valley of the Moon, flee, as they must. London saw the strikes, the fierce struggles for economic and human survival, as symptomatic of the greater problem of humankind out of touch with itself. To return to the soil, to gain salvation, men and women must restore rural America. Billy and Saxon set out to do this, but first they must be reborn; London did not advocate an escape to the wilderness but a return to the goodness of nature. To return to Eden, Billy and Saxon must first gain salvation so that they do not spoil Eden as their ancestors once did.

Major Works

Long fiction: A Daughter of the Snows, 1902; The Call of the Wild, 1903; The Sea-Wolf, 1904; The Game, 1905; Before Adam, 1906; White Fang, 1906; The Iron Heel, 1907; Martin Eden, 1908; Burning Daylight, 1910; Adventure, 1911; The Abysmal Brute, 1913; The Valley of the Moon, 1913; The Mutiny of the Elsinore, 1914; The Scarlet Plague, 1915; The Star Rover, 1915; The Little Lady of the Big House, 1916; Jerry of the Islands, 1917; Michael, Brother of Jerry, 1917; Hearts of Three, 1920; The Assassination Bureau, Ltd., 1963 (completed by Robert L. Fish).

Short fiction: The Son of the Wolf, 1900; The God of His Fathers, and Other Stories, 1901; Children of the Frost, 1902; The Faith of Men, and Other Stories, 1904; Love of Life, and Other Stories, 1906; Moon-Face, and Other Stories, 1906; Lost Face, 1910; South Sea Tales, 1911; When God Laughs, and Other Stories, 1911; A Son of the Sun, 1912; Smok Bellew Tales, 1912; The House of Pride, and Other Tales of Hawaii, 1912; The Night-Born, 1913; The Strength of the Strong, 1914; The Turtles of Tasman, 1916; The Human Drift, 1917; The Red One, 1918; On the Makaloa Mat, 1919; Dutch Courage, and Other Stories, 1922. plays: Scorn of Women, pb. 1906; Theft, pb. 1910; The Acorn-Planter, pb. 1916; The Plays of Jack London, pb. 2001.

Nonfiction: The Kempton-Wace Letters, 1903 (with Anna Strunsky); The People of the Abyss, 1903; The War of the Classes, 1905; The Road, 1907; Revolution, and Other Essays, 1910; The Cruise of the Snark, 1911; John Barleycorn, 1913; Letters from Jack London, 1965 (King Hendricks and Irving Shepard, editors); No Mentor but Myself: Jack London on Writers and Writing, 1979, revised and expanded 1999 (Dale L. Walker and Jeanne Campbell Reesman, editors).

Children's literature: The Cruise of the Dazzler, 1902; Tales of the Fish Patrol, 1905.

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