

NATURALISM IN SELECTED NOVELS AND SHORT STORIES  
OF  
JACK LONDON

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ARTS AND SCIENCES

BY  
JEANETTE JAMES FRANK, B. A.

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We hereby recommend that the thesis prepared under  
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and Short Stories of  
Jack London"

be accepted as fulfilling this part of the requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts in English

Committee:

Gladys Maddocks  
Chairman  
Antony Nell Wiley  
Chambers Thomas Bruce

Accepted:

L. L. Morrison  
Dean of Graduate Studies

## PREFACE

Jack London once said that he realized that his readers did not look for an underlying meaning in any of his works, and that they read into the stories what they wanted to see in them. This realization was brought home to him while he was in Korea, reporting the Russian-Japanese War, when an official came to his hotel room and informed him that a huge crowd was gathered outside to see him. London was delighted to think that his fame had spread as far as Korea, and he immediately went out to mount the platform which they had erected for him. But when he was prepared to speak, the official forestalled him by requesting that he remove his bridge of artificial teeth. For approximately half an hour he stood there on the platform, removing and replacing his teeth to the applause of the crowd. This was London's first glimpse of the fact that men rarely become famous for what means most to them.

During his later life, London admitted to Mary Austin that his finest works had been misunderstood by almost everybody in the world, but he refused to let it bother him. Nevertheless, I think he would be pleased if he were living today to note that critics are finding merits other than adventure and red-blood brutality in his fifty works. More and more,

he is being studied in the light of his contribution to American literature as a naturalistic writer of the turn of the century. In this study, I have tried to show how The Call of the Wild, The Sea Wolf, and a selection of London's short stories are all naturalistic works in plot, characterization, theme, and setting.

I wish to extend my gratitude to Dr. Gladys Maddocks, who has given much time and many valuable ideas to me while directing the writing of this thesis. I also wish to thank Dr. Autrey Nell Wiley, who first suggested that I pursue this study of Jack London and who encouraged me throughout my graduate studies, and Dr. Charles Bruce, who has given time to read the thesis and serve on my examining committee. My personal thanks must go to my husband, who has encouraged and helped me in countless ways, to my daughter, and to my parents, who first instilled in me a desire and a respect for education.

May 12, 1970

Seanette James Frank  
Seanette James Frank

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## CHAPTER I

### JACK LONDON: NATURALISM

Alone or in groups the people come, wandering through the green, fertile valley at the foot of Sonoma Mountain in northern California. This is the valley, the Valley of the Moon, where Jack London lived and worked during the last years of his life, and it is now the location of the Jack London State Park. An average of twenty people a day visit this park, looking through the mementoes collected in the House of Happy Walls, then staring at the ruins of Wolf House, which was to have been London's self-designed castle, and then finally stopping for a moment to look down upon the huge red rock under which his remains are buried.<sup>1</sup>

These people come to the valley because they have heard of Jack London. Perhaps they have heard his name in connection with other places of interest, such as the Jack London Square, London House, or the Sea Wolf Restaurant in Oakland. Many have read some of his works, usually his short story, "To Build a Fire," or his most successful novel, The Call of the Wild. Whatever they have read by him, in reading

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<sup>1</sup>Richard O'Connor, Jack London: A Biography (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1964), p. 4.

it they have come to know something of Jack London, for "almost everything he put on paper derived from his own experience."<sup>1</sup> And Jack London had quite a variety of experiences in his lifetime.

San Francisco marked the place of birth for the son of Flora Wellman and Professor W. H. Chaney on January 12, 1876. Although the Irish astrologer Chaney maintained to the end of his life that he was not the father of this child, Flora was living with him in the months preceding Jack's birth. Chaney may have actually believed he was not the father, for he went so far as to vehemently deny paternity in answer to letters written by Jack himself. The fact that Jack and Chaney seem to have resembled one another closely in both physical appearance and personality, however, points out that most probably Chaney was his father. His mother, Flora Wellman, was a piano teacher who had a great interest in Spiritualism. She went so far as to hold séances in her home. When her son was eight months old, having been deserted by Chaney, she met and married a widower with two children, John London. Her son was given the name of John Griffith London.

Jack's early childhood seems to have been an unhappy one. The Londons moved frequently because of John's efforts to make a living. He went from job to job, following Flora's hunches that he could make more money in another

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<sup>1</sup>O'Connor, p. 8.

venture. By the time Jack was five years old, Flora had him lying on a table helping her summon up spirits during her séances. At age six, he overheard an argument between his mother and father and thus learned that he was illegitimate.

Poverty was the keynote of later memories of his boyhood. In John Barleycorn, Jack recalls the first time he received an undershirt which was new, not a handed down or home-made one. He recalls being so happy he insisted on wearing it without a shirt over it, so everyone could see.

In 1886, the Londons moved to Oakland, where Jack discovered the Oakland Public Library and began to read almost constantly. Miss Ina Coolbrith, head librarian, poet laureate of California, directed his reading, trying to interest him in novels with merits other than that of exciting adventure. What few days of carefree childhood Jack London knew came to an end during his tenth year of life.<sup>1</sup>

At eleven years of age, Jack went to work to supplement the family income. Still attending school, he took morning and afternoon paper routes. His Saturdays were spent as an iceman's apprentice and his Sundays setting up pins in a bowling alley. Odd jobs, such as scrubbing decks, took him near the waterfront, an environment which gave him his love of the sea and of adventure. At thirteen, Jack graduated from Oakland Cole Grammar School and his parents

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<sup>1</sup>O'Connor, p. 41.

decided he was to go to work full time. Working at various jobs, he managed to save six dollars to buy an old skiff, in which he sailed the Estuary and the San Francisco Bay. From the beginning, he loved sailing the rough seas.<sup>1</sup>

His sailing came to an abrupt halt when he was fifteen, for his father, John London, was seriously injured in a train accident and could work no longer. Jack obtained a job in a salmon factory at ten cents an hour, working a minimum of ten hours a day. Needless to say, this job left him no time for his adventuring. Finally, fearing that "his mind would turn into the dull, hopeless vacuum he sensed behind the lusterless eyes of his fellow workers,"<sup>2</sup> he decided to leave his job and become an oyster pirate. The adventures which would provide the basis for much of his writing began then.

With borrowed money, Jack managed to buy a sloop, the "Razzle Dazzle," and with it he acquired a mistress, a worker, and an occupation. At fifteen, he was raiding nightly the oyster beds owned by the Fish Patrol, selling the oysters at market the following morning for forty or fifty dollars a load. His parents were glad to get the money and did not question its source. Soon he tired of this adventure, but after a brief time away, he returned to join the other side of the law, becoming a deputy patrolman with the Fish Patrol.

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<sup>1</sup>O'Connor, p. 42.

<sup>2</sup>O'Connor, p. 43.

Next, he joined a seal hunt for a seven-month cruise off the coast of Siberia.

Arriving back in Oakland after his seal hunting adventure, Jack found the country in the grip of a depression. Millions of people were out of work, and those who were working in the Oakland area received only ten cents an hour, regardless of what type of job they held. First Jack managed to wangle a job in a jute mill, with the manager promising him a raise which he never received. Leaving this job, he took another one as a coal-passer, working under the impression that he could work his way up the ladder to something better. That he was being exploited once again soon became evident as he learned from one of the firemen that he had replaced two men and was doing the work of two.

It was during this time that Jack's mother learned of a contest being sponsored by the San Francisco Call, in which a prize of twenty-five dollars was being offered for the best descriptive article submitted. Why she should think that he could write is not known today, unless it was simply that she remembered that his father, Chaney, was a writer. But Jack did enter the contest, describing a typhoon he had weathered while on the seal-hunting schooner, the "Sophie Sutherland," and he was awarded the prize. Irving Stone mentions that the story, "Typhoon off the Coast of Japan," is still "fresh and vigorous" after the passing of many years.

He writes of the article:

The imagery is vivid, the element of suspense is never lacking, the prose rolls onward with an authentic rhythm of the sea; and there is music in the sentences of the seventeen-year-old boy who had had only a grammar-school education.<sup>1</sup>

Jack immediately sat down to write another sea tale, but this one was rejected by the Call.

At this time Americans began to become aware that an industrial United States was facing many of the problems that people had come here to get away from. They could see that there was great wealth in the country, yet millions of people were out of work, and starving. In the East, Jacob S. Coxey came forth with a scheme to alleviate the depression. He suggested that Congress should issue five million dollars to finance road-building projects to give jobs to the jobless. When his suggestion was completely ignored, he organized Coxey's "Industrial Army" to march on the capitol as a demonstration of the seriousness of his intent.<sup>2</sup>

In Oakland, Charles T. Kelly, a young printer, organized a Western group to join the march. Jack London heard about it and decided to join the group because the journey would offer escape from the drudgery of work for little reward. He and a friend, Frank Davis, joined Kelly's army, and they encountered many hardships on the march.

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<sup>1</sup>Jack London, Sailor on Horseback (New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1966), p. 43.

<sup>2</sup>O'Connor, p. 59.

Their clothing wore out, their shoes fell apart, they had nothing to eat. As the hardships became more severe, Davis turned back, but Jack was determined to continue on. He learned to slip away from the group to beg at doors for food and money and clothes.

Finally the brigade fell apart, and Jack left for New York City, where he spent his mornings begging at doors and his afternoons reading in the park. Tiring of this, he headed for Niagara Falls, where he was arrested for vagrancy and placed in jail. After spending thirty days at hard labor, he was released to continue his travels through Washington, Baltimore, Boston, and Montreal, gathering information which he was later to use in his book, The Road. Returning to San Francisco, Jack found his thoughts were turning toward Socialism. To him, Socialism seemed the only answer to the problems he had encountered thus far in his life: poverty, exploitation, jail. He looked at life from a new angle now because of what he had seen on the road, in the jute mill, in the cannery, on the "Sophie Sutherland," and on the Oakland waterfront.<sup>1</sup>

At nineteen years of age, Jack London decided to return to high school. His fellow schoolmates looked down upon him because he was older and not as well-dressed as they were. Jack, older in years and much older in experience,

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<sup>1</sup>O'Connor, pp. 61-68.

pretended indifference to them all. However, the relationship between Jack and the others began to change when Jack started writing for the school magazine, the Aegis.

Having dropped out of high school at the end of the first year, he spent the summer studying an average of nineteen hours a day for college entrance examinations, which he managed to pass without difficulty. He then attended the University of California at Berkeley for a year, hoping to learn to write. Lacking sufficient funds to continue his education, he dropped out of college and tried writing essays, short stories, and poetry. Unfortunately, these works were not readily accepted by any publisher.<sup>1</sup>

Then came the news of the Gold Rush to the Yukon. Jack sailed in the first wave to the gold fields, dreaming of quick rewards. Unfortunately, his group arrived at its destination too late to reach Dawson before winter set in, and they were caught in a blizzard, having to spend the winter in a cabin. Jack London found gold in the Yukon, but not in the way he had expected. He had earned money helping men carry their packs up Chilkoot Pass, which Stone describes as being one of the world's toughest to climb, and he had earned three thousand dollars taking boats through White Horse Rapids when no one else could. But his real fortune

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<sup>1</sup>Stone, pp. 63-76.

came in a somewhat different form, for

All that long winter, when his companions thought him notable mainly for his idleness, good nature, and garrulity, he was living on a level invisible to them, storing up the images and impressions that one day would be conveyed to millions all over the world, making those men, commonplace to themselves and others, something like immortal. He was weaving a legend, creating a Klondike that never existed except in his imagination, a myth so powerful it was accepted as reality by people who had actually lived it. He was making a fairly ordinary breed of men into a race of heroes, great of heart, mind, and body.<sup>1</sup>

When he finally reached Dawson, he spent his time talking to people and listening to their stories, rather than digging for gold. Soon he began keeping a notebook of impressions from the Yukon, making notes of sights and sounds. Finally, he decided to return to Oakland to settle down.

Unable to find steady employment, he began to spend most of his day at his writing. Later he was to write of his trials in trying to write and find a publisher in the semi-autobiographical novel, Martin Eden. In this book, he wrote of knowing no one from whom to get advice as to what was wrong with his work. He began to think editors were machines, because he always received the same stereotyped form of rejection slip, with never a personal note attached. Spending his days studying the work of successful authors and then trying to imitate the best from all of them, Jack London soon ran out of money. After pawning his overcoat, his watch, and his bicycle, he continued studying, taking

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<sup>1</sup>O'Connor, p. 93.

copious notes. The seriousness of his intent was recalled in Martin Eden, where he wrote:

On the looking-glass were lists of definitions and pronunciations; when shaving or dressing, or combing his hair, he conned these lists over. Similar lists were on the wall over the oil-stove, and they were similarly conned while he was engaged in cooking or washing the dishes.<sup>1</sup>

After months of collecting rejection slips, he finally sold the short story "To the Man on Trail" to the Overland Monthly for five dollars. London was very disappointed and discouraged at this, for

Even the five dollars was but a promise, and he had to make a personal visit to the editorial offices in San Francisco to collect it.<sup>2</sup>

To the man who was starving and who had debts to pay to the grocer, to the landlady, and to the typewriter-rental shop, this letter of acceptance could hardly have afforded him much encouragement. Fortunately, however, in a few days he received a check for forty dollars for a horror story he had recently sent to the Black Cat. These sales were at least a beginning for Jack London, and he sold eight more stories to the Overland Monthly in 1898 for seven dollars and fifty cents each. Two years later, in 1900, he sold "An Odyssey of the North" to the Atlantic Monthly, and it was published in book form together with the previously sold stories under

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<sup>1</sup>(New York: The Review of Reviews Company, 1917), p. 196.

<sup>2</sup>Franklin Walker, Jack London and the Klondike (California: The Huntington Library, 1966), p. 199.

the title The Son of the Wolf. It appeared on April 7, 1900, the day he was married to Bess Maddern. Jack London was on his way, having published the first of his fifty books.

During the next four years, London published eight books, five of them dealing with his life in the Klondike. His most famous work, The Call of the Wild, came out in 1903. He sold this dog story to Macmillan for two thousand dollars, without retaining the royalty rights. He was not to know at the time that the first printing of this book, ten thousand copies, would be sold out on publication day. Recalling the voyage he had made on the "Sophie Sutherland," he began to write The Sea Wolf, which was published in 1904 and is still regarded today as one of his best works. By 1906, Jack London was the highest-paid and most famous writer in America.<sup>1</sup>

He had divorced his first wife and remarried, and he and his new wife left for a cruise around the world, a venture which was to give him new material for his work. While on this trip, he conceived the idea for Martin Eden, a story to be based on his early romance with Mabel Applegarth and his early attempts at writing. After Jack became ill on the voyage with what appeared to be some strange skin disease, he and his wife, Charmian, returned to California, settling in the Valley of the Moon.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Stone, pp. 139-164. Two daughters were born to London and his wife during this period, also.

<sup>2</sup>Stone, pp. 165-221.

His affairs had been hopelessly tangled under the mismanagement of a "friend" while he was away, and he returned to find that

He was under a staggering load of debt, his health was badly undermined, the newspapers of the country were either hostile or disinterested, the magazine editors had seen so little material from him in the past year that they suspected he was through; even the public was tiring of his recent work . . . .<sup>1</sup>

Immediately he set to work to straighten out his affairs.

Martin Eden was finished and published, along with several important short stories. He worked frantically, and by 1913, he was again the most widely-known author in America.

But to the man who grew up with bad times and hardships, sorrow was to come again. The strength of his short stories began to lessen, and ideas for plots became fewer. His self-designed castle, Wolf House, which cost eighty thousand dollars before it was completed, burned to the ground on the day of its completion. Added to the fact that he was in debt for one hundred thousand dollars, he began to have marital problems. Ill health began to plague him, and his daughters seemed totally alienated from him. People took advantage of his generosity, and thus he began to feel disappointed in humanity. But he kept writing to keep his debts paid and his ranch going. On November 22, 1916, Jack London died of an overdose of morphine.

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<sup>1</sup>Stone, p. 238.

Looking back on the life he had lived, one can see that his was not an easy one. Being born into the world under the stain of illegitimacy was the first of Jack London's many problems. His family moved too often for him to make friends of his own age. Here was a man who worked hard for a living, engaging in many different types of manual labor both as a child and as a young man. He knew the hardships of life and the problems one encountered, and he knew that the solutions were not always the most pleasant ones. Having lived such a life as this one, he actually saw life as a struggle for survival. His works reflect this attitude, using the theme "that life is a struggle for survival in a world that is cruel and grim but in which the fighting will has a chance to triumph."<sup>1</sup>

Because Jack London wrote of the things he had experienced and described life as it really was, naturalistic elements are prevalent in his works. He was writing in the period when naturalism as a movement in the novel was being introduced into America through the works of Emile Zola and other European naturalists and realists. Lars Ahnebrink has written in regard to the entrance of naturalism that

Conditions in America at the time favored the new literary tendencies: industrialism had wrought great

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<sup>1</sup>Van Wyck Brooks, The Confident Years (New York: American Book-Stratford Press, Inc., 1952), p. 229.

changes in American society; a new class, the proletariat, claimed attention; materialism had a strong grip on American life; and the closing of the frontier and its psychological implications challenged the earlier optimistic outlook. In addition, evolutionary doctrines helped to dissolve traditional conceptions of life and the universe.<sup>1</sup>

But what this new movement in literature really was cannot easily be determined today, for few naturalistic writers have utilized the same methods and techniques. Basically, however, it involved the application of scientific principles to writing in an attempt to portray the natural man. The scientific movement of the nineteenth century was expanding its theories into literature, most often emphasizing the law of causation.

Naturalism, said to have originated in France, was in essence an extension of realism. The term was first expressed as a certain form of writing by Zola, and it is he who is given credit for originating the form itself, a form which was never clearly defined and thus never conscientiously followed. In his work, Le Roman Expérimentale, now often considered the handbook of naturalism, Zola explained that the experimental method used in the sciences should also be adapted to novel writing. He felt this method could lead to an understanding of emotional life. His idea was this:

That the scientific novelist will set up an experiment involving carefully defined characters who are subjected

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<sup>1</sup>The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction  
(New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1961), p. 410.

to certain carefully defined influences, and from their reactions he will deduce scientific conclusions which can in time be reduced to laws.<sup>1</sup>

So it is that from Zola came the idea of the naturalistic novel, and with the idea came a method to follow. He advocated the study of manuals and scientific works to produce a background of realism. But more important than this, he advised consultation with people well-versed in the subject, and if at all possible, personal experience. Every impression was to be annotated carefully.

To a certain degree, naturalism could be identified with realism, in that it attempted to show the reality of life, but it added to this an aspect of determinism. Thus it was that the naturalistic writer was faithful to the little details of contemporary life, but he depicted everyday life with a larger role of heredity and environment in determining the behavior of man. Natural law and socioeconomic influences thus appeared more powerful than the human will. One can see, then, that "the fundamental view of man which the naturalist takes is of an animal in the natural world, responding to environmental forces and internal stresses and drives, over none of which he has wither control or full knowledge."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Child Walcutt, American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), p. 33.

<sup>2</sup>William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook To Literature, edited by C. Hugh Holman (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1960), pp. 301-302.

The subject matter chosen by the naturalist was drawn from the broad expanse of life itself. He looked at life from an objective point of view, moving away from Victorian reticence to a new frankness. The total man was to be studied, with emphasis on his stronger instincts, fear, hunger, and sex. With this increased interest in picturing reality and observing facts, the writer felt free to choose for study any subject in the realm of his knowledge. Thus it was that subjects became common which had been shunned in earlier days, such as social misery and prostitution. The naturalist presented his material in an amoral manner, not setting himself up to judge but to record what happened.

With the naturalistic movement came a change in the method of selecting characters for novels. The naturalist looked around him and chose for his characters people from the lower and middle classes. These people were the common people, the poor, the uneducated, the underprivileged. Instead of portraying a fictional world of sunlight and happiness for them, he placed them in their own environment, engaged in their routine activities. Thus it was that the "lower classes, the masses, became heroes and heroines of grim tales, and the new subject matter was treated of with a sincerity and brutality uncommon before."<sup>1</sup> The naturalist commonly chose characters from two specific types of human nature. He would portray man

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<sup>1</sup>Ahnebrink, p. 25.

with a strong physique, with strong animal drives, or he would present a character with an excited, neurotic personality.

In keeping with the belief that the environment had a powerful influence on man, the naturalist emphasized setting. Nature was to be studied and reproduced truthfully and objectively, for everything that is real exists in nature. By studying a man's surroundings, the writer could understand him better and explain him in a more exact way. He made use of color, sound, and odor to promote realism in nature.

The naturalist could employ several themes and motifs in his works. I have already introduced his preoccupation with determinism, whereby he conceived of man as controlled by instincts or passions, or by social or economic environment and circumstances. Man was exhibited as having no free will. Because either external or internal forces controlled and determined his behavior, man was not responsible for his actions. The theme of survival was connected with determinism, too, through the Darwinian doctrine of the survival of the fittest. Some naturalists developed the idea of the strong man, the superman, who, through sheer strength of character or body, could survive and rise above his environment.<sup>1</sup>

The theme of atavism was used in the works of certain naturalists. In this condition, one's primitive self, with

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<sup>1</sup>Lewis Mumford, The Golden Day (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926), pp. 248-249.

its strength and capacity for violence, is close to the civilized surface. Through it, man can rise to the challenge of new situations. This theme seems closely allied with that of primordialism, which concerns the exploitation of the idea that civilization is a thin veneer and that the primitive brute is close to the surface. Through the consideration of these two themes, naturalists formed a basic idea for novels, that beneath the surface placidity of everyday life there is turbulence, and that the source of this violence is the presence "in all men of animal qualities which are now frequently atavistic and destructive."<sup>1</sup>

An attitude toward life, that of pessimism, was often present in naturalistic works. To these writers, tragedy seemed inherent in the human situation, "given man's animal past and the possibility that he will be dominated by that past in particular circumstances."<sup>2</sup>

The first American naturalists are said to have been Harold Frederic, Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane, and Jack London. Each contributed his own ideas and his own subjects to naturalism. Harold Frederic wrote two novels revealing the narrowness of farm life and the deprivation in small-town life. Hamlin Garland wrote partly autobiographical

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<sup>1</sup>Donald Pizer, Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1966), p. 16.

<sup>2</sup>Pizer, p. 19.

narratives depicting life on the midwestern prairies. These writers revealed a freshness, a new vigor and frankness in their work, but they did not develop a technique which would allow them to construct their novels according to naturalistic principles. Thus they are termed as realists rather than naturalists by some critics of today. The works of Stephen Crane, however, are considered by many to be examples of pure naturalism. Walcutt writes of him:

Crane's naturalism is descriptive: he does not pretend to set forth a proof, like a chemical demonstration, that what happened must have happened, inevitably. This is what Zola was forever saying he did, and it is for these pretensions of scientific demonstration and proof that he has been chided by later critics. Crane simply shows how a sequence of events takes place quite independently of the wills and judgements of the people involved. The reader is convinced that it happened that way, and he sees that the ordinary moral sentiments do not adequately judge or account for these happenings.<sup>1</sup>

Jack London, too, is often classified as a naturalist. I feel he can be termed one because he made use of many of the themes and motifs employed by that school of writing. He wrote of the life he had lived and the things he had seen. Like Zola, he studied scientific manuals and works, taking copious notes. He kept notebooks filled with ideas and suggestions for future novels, and to these ideas he could add personal experiences. In Martin Eden, London gave us a glimpse of his conception of himself as a writer, for Eden is an extension of London himself. He stated as the reason

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<sup>1</sup>Walcutt, pp. 74-75.

for Eden's being a good storyteller the fact that

He saw with wide eyes, and he could tell what he saw. . . . He selected from the vast mass of detail with an artist's touch, drawing pictures of life that glowed and burned with light and color, injecting movement so that his listeners surged along with him on the flood of rough eloquence, enthusiasm, and power.<sup>1</sup>

In the same work, London said in regard to his writing, "It is life. It is real. It is true. And I must write life as I see it" (p. 298).

I feel that London did attempt to write life as he saw it, and as I stated earlier, he saw life as a struggle in which only the strong could survive. It is generally agreed that Jack London will be remembered for The Call of the Wild, The Sea-Wolf, and several of his short stories. Therefore, I will discuss in depth in the ensuing chapters the elements of naturalism in these, his best-known works.

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<sup>1</sup>London, Martin Eden, p. 20.

## CHAPTER II

### NATURALISM IN THE CALL OF THE WILD

Fame came to Jack London in 1903 with the publication by Macmillan of The Call of the Wild. This recognition was a deserved one, for he had not only dreamed of it but had zealously worked for it. The idea for this novel had come to him at a very opportune time, too. His wife, Bessie, had just given birth to their second daughter, and London once again knew grave disappointment at not having a son born to them. But an idea for a new novel was able to awaken him from his lethargy; he planned to write a dog story as a companion piece to one he had written earlier. London later admitted that The Call of the Wild almost wrote itself, for he allowed it to "grow however it willed, for the story was master now and he the servant writing it; it had taken hold of his imagination and fired him as no other yarn he had ever tackled."<sup>1</sup> When the story was finished, he realized that its scope was far greater than he had initially anticipated.

The novel was an immediate success and was sold out on publication day. Adventure lovers thrilled to this new

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<sup>1</sup>Irving Stone, Jack London, Sailor on Horseback (New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1966), p. 161.

story of strength and daring, and to London's great delight, members of intellectual circles admired it, too. Frank Luther Mott in his introduction to The Call of the Wild recalls that London was fond of relating an incident which occurred the year following the publication of this book. He was invited to speak on socialism at the University of California, and into his address he inserted his feelings regarding the way in which literature was being taught there. When talking with some of his listeners following his speech, he again stated that

The universities gave a false impression of literature by assigning for students' reading only the older classics and neglecting the vital literature which reflects the thought and life about us. "Perhaps you are not aware, Mr. London," replied Professor Gayley drily, "that we are using your own Call of the Wild in our classes?"<sup>1</sup>

Because London's novel was accepted and discussed by intellectual groups, one can assume that members of these groups saw in it something other than a simple story of a dog's adventures in the North. Perhaps they examined the story as an allegory of man's life on the earth, or as an example of the new trend toward naturalism in this country.

As a literary product of the turn of the century, The Call of the Wild definitely contained naturalistic ideas. London remained true to Zola's ideas concerning background

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<sup>1</sup>Jack London, The Call of the Wild (New York: Washington Square Press, 1962), p. xiv. All subsequent references are to this edition.

for writing. He wrote this novel utilizing the sounds and sights he had recorded in the journal he had kept in the Klondike. He had first-hand information of the first gold strikes and of the problems encountered in the North. To this personal experience, he added research.

London emphasized setting in this novel, as did most naturalistic writers in their works, but not for itself alone. It was used to give the background, but he linked it with the naturalistic idea of socioeconomic determinism. The individual is presented as a victim of environmental forces and factors beyond his control. Thus it is that Buck, half St. Bernard and half Scotch shepherd, is introduced as the hero of the novel, and from the beginning, it is clear that he is a product of his environment. Living on Judge Miller's ranch in the "sun-kissed" Santa Clara Valley in California, Buck was allowed a life of leisure. No one made him do any work, for

The whole realm was his. He plunged into the swimming tank or went hunting with the Judge's sons; he escorted Mollie and Alice, the Judge's daughters, on long twilight or early morning rambles; on wintry nights he lay at the Judge's feet before the roaring library fire; he carried the Judge's grandsons on his back, or rolled them in the grass, and guarded their footsteps through wild adventures down to the fountain in the stable yard, and even beyond, where the paddocks were, and the berry patches. (p. 2)

This was his routine life, and London reveals what this type of life had brought out in Buck:

During the four years since his puppyhood he lived the life of a sated aristocrat; he had a fine pride in himself,

was ever a trifle egotistical, as country gentlemen sometimes become because of their insular condition. (p. 3)

He could have become a fat and lazy house dog, but there was something within him which prevented this. He loved hunting and romping in the outdoors, and perhaps this is what saved him.

From this setting, with its influences on Buck's character, London shifted to the Yukon for a study of what this environment could do to Buck. That life was different in the Klondike soon became apparent to him, for

At the first step upon the cold surface, Buck's feet sank into white mushy something very like mud. He sprang back with a snort. More of this white stuff was falling through the air. He shook himself, but more of it fell upon him. He sniffed it curiously, then licked some up on his tongue. It bit like fire, and the next instant was gone. (p. 12)

This country was quite different from the sunny valley where he had spent the previous years of his life; even the atmosphere here was different. People were in a hurry, always trying to get somewhere, and there was no time for idleness. Dogs were here not to be a companion to man, but to serve him. Buck soon learned that he had to work along with the rest:

François fastened upon him an arrangement of straps and buckles. It was a harness, such as he had seen the grooms put on the horses at home. And as he had seen horses work, so he was set to work, hauling François on a sled to the forest that fringed the valley, and returning with a load of firewood. (p. 14)

Buck learned quickly and was soon ready for the trail. Some days they made forty miles, and other days they barely

made ten. Buck was always extremely tired at the end of the day, and he was always ravenous. Because of this,

He quickly lost the fastidiousness which had characterized his old life. A dainty eater, he found that his mates, finishing first, robbed him of his unfinished ration. There was no defending it. While he was fighting off two or three, it was disappearing down the throats of the others. (p. 20)

He found he had to adapt to his new environment in yet another way, too. When it came time for sleep, he tried lying on the snow, but he soon got to his feet. Deciding to do a little research, Buck went to find out how his team mates were sleeping. He accidentally sank down into a bank of snow and discovered that a dog was curled up in a ball under the snow. Thereafter, he dug a hole in the snow for himself and crawled in to sleep the sleep of the exhausted.

Thus his environment and experiences in that environment soon changed Buck into a different individual, for

His muscles became hard as iron and he grew callous to all ordinary pain. He achieved an internal as well as external economy. He could eat anything, no matter how loathsome or indigestible; and once eaten, the juices of his stomach extracted the last least particle of nutriment; and his blood carried it to the farthest reaches of his body, building it into the toughest and stoutest of tissues. (pp. 21-22)

Determinism today is sometimes defined as a kind of fate, and fate seems to have dealt a hand in the relationship between Buck and Spitz. Spitz was the leader of the team, and he disliked Buck intensely, once attacking him when Buck was too exhausted to fight back. Perhaps he saw Buck as a serious competitor for his position. Whatever his reasons

were, the fight did seem inevitable, or previously determined, for

Buck wanted it. He wanted it because it was his nature, because he had been gripped tight by that nameless, incomprehensible pride of the trail and trace--that pride which holds dogs in the toil to the last gasp, which lures them to die joyfully in the harness, and breaks their hearts if they are cut out of the harness. (p. 31)

Something within Buck, possibly this pride of the trail, made him openly attempt to overthrow Spitz's leadership. He encouraged mutiny among the other sled dogs, and finally the long-expected fight came. Buck managed to break both front legs of his opponent, and then he killed Spitz in the final rush, for "mercy was a thing reserved for gentler climes" (p. 39).

By the time Buck came to know John Thornton, the dog was a complete product of his environment. He loved Thornton, but

. . . the strain of the primitive, which the Northland had aroused in him, remained alive and active. Faithfulness and devotion, things born of fire and roof, were his; yet he retained his wildness and wiliness. He was a thing of the wild, come in from the wild to sit by John Thornton's fire, rather than a dog of the soft Southland stamped with the marks of generations of civilization. (p. 71)

Thus London exhibited the extent to which environment could change an individual, for by the end of the novel, Buck was transformed when he walked into the forest:

At once he became a thing of the wild, stealing softly along, cat-footed, a passing shadow that appeared and disappeared among the shadows. He knew how to take advantage of every cover, to crawl on his belly like

a snake, and like a snake to leap and strike. He could take a ptarmigan from its nest, kill a rabbit as it slept, and snap in mid air the little chipmunks fleeing a second too late for the trees. Fish, in open pools, were not too quick for him; nor were beaver, mending their dams, too wary. (p. 93)

Closely allied with the theme of determinism in The Call of the Wild is that of the struggle for survival. London was well aware that life was a struggle, and so he placed Buck in an environment where this eternal struggle would be brought home to him. From the minute Buck was led away from Judge Miller's ranch, he began to grow in knowledge of the ways of men. When he was given over to the stranger by Manuel, he learned quickly that not all men were to be trusted, for the man pulled tightly on the rope around Buck's neck, attempting to choke him. Buck felt the surging need to fight back in an effort to save his life, and,

In quick rage he sprang at the man, who met him halfway, grappled him close by the throat, and with a deft twist threw him over on his back. Then the rope tightened mercilessly, while Buck struggled in fury, his tongue lolling out of his mouth and his great chest panting futilely. Never in all his life had he been so vilely treated, and never in all his life had he been so angry. (p. 4)

This was Buck's first introduction to fear, a fear of death rather than a fear of man.

The proud and sensitive Buck suffered many torments on his voyage to the Northland. He was repeatedly choked senseless until he was finally placed in a cage, where he suffered even more injury to his pride. Men would come up

to the cage and tease him, and,

When he flung himself against the bars, quivering and frothing, they laughed at him and taunted him. They growled and barked like detestable dogs, mewed, and flapped their arms and crowed. It was all very silly, he knew; but therefore the more outrage to his dignity, and his anger waxed and waxed. (p. 6)

There was no Judge Miller around to protect him from these men; so Buck had to fight for himself.

Soon he was to learn that another law governed this land, rather than the law of fair play that he had known, for he was to be introduced to the fat man in the red sweater who wielded a mighty club. The man used a hatchet to free Buck from his cage, and Buck sprang out, half crazed from the torments he had suffered. He attacked the man in the red sweater repeatedly, and each time he was struck down by a stunning blow from the man's club. Finally he was knocked senseless and could no longer get up. When he came to his senses, he realized that

He was beaten (he knew that): but he was not broken. He saw, once for all, that he stood no chance against a man with a club. He had learned the lesson, and in all his after life he never forgot it. That club was a revelation. It was his introduction to the reign of primitive law, and he met the introduction halfway. (p. 9)

A few days later, Buck learned the other law which governed this land of the primitive. He watched as Curly, a friendly dog, made advances to a husky who was not so friendly, to say the least. The husky turned on Curly and ripped her face open. A silent circle of huskies closed in around them to watch the fight. Once Curly went down, she never regained

her feet, for the circle closed in on her. The men came in, beating the dogs off of her with their clubs, but

She lay there limp and lifeless in the bloody, trampled snow, almost literally torn to pieces, the swart half-breed standing over her and cursing horribly. The scene often came back to trouble Buck in his sleep. So that was the way. No fair play. Once down, that was the end of you. (p. 14)

Through this vicarious experience, Buck was introduced to the law of the fang. He learned his lesson that day; he knew he must never go down if he wanted to survive.

Buck had to learn many things in a hurry if he wished to survive in this cold and savage Northland. He weighed more than the other dogs and so he received more to eat, but he was never satisfied. The tiring work of pulling the sled made him more ravenous each day, and he felt that he had to have more food. One day he happened to see another dog engaged in the act of stealing a piece of bacon, and Buck learned a lesson from him. Extra food would mean survival to him; so he managed to take a whole chunk of bacon behind Perrault's back. London used this incident to show that

This first theft marked Buck as fit to survive in the hostile Northland environment. It marked his adaptability, his capacity to adjust himself to changing conditions, the lack of which meant swift and terrible death. It marked, further, the decay or going to pieces of his moral nature, a vain thing and a handicap in the ruthless struggle for existence. It was all well enough in the Southland, under the law of love and fellowship, to respect private property and personal feelings; but in the Northland, under the law of club and fang, whoso took such things into account was a fool, and in so far as he observed them he would fail to prosper. (p. 21)

London showed in this way the strength of the desire for survival; it can make one forget one's moral reservations. Buck learned well the law of the primitive: "kill or be killed, eat or be eaten" (p. 72). While staying with John Thornton, he ranged through the forest, hunting and fishing for his food, until

The blood-longing became stronger than ever before. He was a killer, a thing that preyed, living on the things that lived, unaided, alone, by virtue of his own strength and prowess, surviving triumphantly in a hostile environment where only the strong survive. (p. 91)

With this sentence, London gave the impression that Buck would survive because of his strength and cunning. This idea deviated somewhat from the traditional pessimistic ideas of the naturalists, for London allowed a vestige of hope.

Then to the struggle-for-survival theme in The Call of the Wild, Jack London added another dimension. From the German philosopher Nietzsche, he borrowed the idea of the "superman" who would rise above the level of common humanity. The superman would be someone who would be guided by the great driving forces of human life and would rise above accepted ethics and go beyond good and evil. He would be master of both reason and passion, and he would dare to live completely and magnificently, shrinking from nothing. In The Call of the Wild, London presented Buck as a superman or "superdog" figure, built to resemble London himself. Perhaps this is the reason why some critics claimed this novel made a hero of "Jack London

in dogskin."<sup>1</sup>

From the beginning of the novel, London emphasized that Buck was no ordinary dog. While on Judge Miller's ranch, Buck exhibited qualities which showed him to be a superior creature, even in this environment. He is described by London as having a "dignity that comes of good living and universal respect" (p. 3). He was king of the ranch, "king over all creeping, crawling, flying things of Judge Miller's place, humans included" (p. 2).

After Buck had been introduced to the law of the club, he realized that man was a master who must be obeyed. Buck would obey, but he was not going to be friendly. Nevertheless, men who came to buy dogs recognized him as a fine animal, even an outstanding one. Ferrault was willing to pay three hundred dollars for him, for he considered Buck "one in a thousand" (p. 11). This faith in him was justified, for he quickly learned to pull in the traces and adjust to his new surroundings in various ways. Soon Buck could compare with the dogs who had long been in the traces, for

Sight and scent became remarkably keen, while his hearing developed such acuteness that in his sleep he heard the faintest sound and knew whether it heralded peace or peril . . . . His most conspicuous trait was an ability to scent the wind and forecast it a night in advance.  
(p. 22)

London emphasized the superman in Buck once again when he described him as being deliberate in his attitude

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<sup>1</sup>Richard O'Connor, Jack London: A Biography (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1964), p. 173.

rather than rash. The lead dog feared Buck because he was a different type of dog:

And strange Buck was to him, for of the many Southland dogs he had known, not one had shown up worthily in camp and on the trail. They were all too soft, dying under the toil, the frost, and starvation. Buck was the exception. He alone endured and prospered, matching the husky in strength, savagery, and cunning. Then he was a masterful dog, and what made him dangerous was the fact that the club of the man in the red sweater had knocked all blind pluck and rashness out of his desire for mastery. He was preëminently cunning, and could bide his time with a patience that was nothing less than primitive. (p. 31)

The time for the inevitable fight between Spitz, the lead dog, and Buck was nearing. Only an exceptional dog could conquer Spitz, who was a cunning and experienced fighter. For the first few minutes of the fight, it looked as though Buck was going to be defeated,

But Buck possessed a quality that made for greatness--imagination. He fought by instinct, but he could fight by head as well. He rushed, as though attempting the old shoulder trick, but at the last instant swept low to the snow and in. His teeth closed on Spitz's left fore leg. (p. 38)

Thus it was that Buck, the superdog, was able to defeat Spitz and assume the leadership of the team. And in his new task Buck proved to be invaluable, for

Highly as the dog-driver had forevalued Buck, with his two devils, he found, while the day was yet young, that he had undervalued. At a bound Buck took up the duties of leadership; and where judgment was required, and quick thinking and quick acting, he showed himself the superior even of Spitz, of whom François had never seen an equal. (p. 42)

At this point Perrault and François both agreed that Buck was worth a thousand dollars.

Buck and the other dogs were sold to new masters, working with more strength than they thought they possessed to get the mail through. Then they were sold to Hal and Charles, two men from the States who should have remained there. With little knowledge of the Yukon and the trail, they hastened the day when disaster would come to them. Thornton advised them that the ice was going to break at any minute, but they refused to listen. Buck, the leader of the team, refused to get up, for he had a "vague feeling of impending doom" (p. 65). Because of his stubbornness and the accuracy of his instincts, he remained there on the ground, insensitive to the beating he was receiving. Thornton cut him out of the traces, and in this way Buck was saved. The strong individual, Buck, was the only member of his team to survive.

Thornton was the kind of man who brought out the best in Buck, and Buck proved himself to be of value to him more than once. Twice he saved Thornton's life, and in his efforts to save him, Buck exhibited once again qualities of the hero. Surely no ordinary dog could have managed to swim out into a strong current three times in an effort to save his master from going over the rapids, and return to shore with only three broken ribs.

Strange dogs that Buck encountered feared him, for they realized that he was stronger and more cunning than they. These dogs, "no matter what the breed or valor, swiftly

acknowledged Buck's supremacy or found themselves struggling for life with a terrible antagonist" (p. 71).

But perhaps London's best example of the way in which Buck could be classified as a superdog is found in the section of the book dealing with the bet that John Thornton made in the Eldorado Saloon. He bet some drinking companions that Buck could start a thousand pounds and walk away, pulling it for a hundred yards. Although "not a man believed him capable of the feat" (p. 79), Buck managed to move the sled out slowly and carry it the required distance, thus winning sixteen hundred dollars for his master.

After Thornton was killed, Buck left to become a leader of a wolf pack. He remained the best, the superior animal, because

His cunning was wolf cunning, and wild cunning; his intelligence, shepherd intelligence and St. Bernard intelligence; and all this, plus an experience gained in the fiercest of schools, made him as formidable a creature as any that roamed the wild . . . . Every part, brain and body, nerve tissue and fibre, was keyed to the most exquisite pitch; and between all the parts there was a perfect equilibrium or adjustment. (p. 92)

So it is that Buck fits the concept of the superman. He was master of his passion and his reason, and he dared to live his life to the fullest. He rose above accepted morals because there was no place for morals in his new life.

The superman fitted into one of the two specific types of human nature usually studied by naturalists. He was the individual with the strong physique and strong drives, like

Buck. London presented other characters in The Call of the Wild with this personality, too, such as John Thornton. He was an independent individual:

John Thornton asked little of man or nature. He was unafraid of the wild. With a handful of salt and a rifle he could plunge into the wilderness and fare wherever he pleased and as long as he pleased. (p. 85)

Buck felt Thornton was an "ideal master," for

Other men saw to the welfare of their dogs from a sense of duty and business expediency; he saw to the welfare of his as if they were his own children, because he could not help it. And he saw further. He never forgot a kindly greeting or a cheering word . . . (p. 69)

London also included characters in this novel representing the other type of human nature usually explored by the naturalist. The personality of Charles was evident from the moment of his introduction into the story, for he was described as possessing "weak and watery eyes" (p. 52). Hal, too, seemed to have a weak, neurotic personality, for he refused to listen to advice about the loading of the sled. He whipped the dogs for not being able to move the overloaded sled instead of trying to lighten their load.

London included a woman character in this novel, too. Mercedes did not possess a strong or perceptive mind, either, and she was self-centered to the extent that she insisted upon riding on the sled when the dogs could barely stumble along in front of it. Her ignorance and the irresponsibility shown by her brothers must have been evident to all, for

Buck felt vaguely that there was no depending upon these two men and the woman. They did not know how to do

anything, and as the days went by it became apparent that they could not learn. They were slack in all things, without order or discipline. (p. 58)

The weak could not survive in this environment, and London showed this by relating what happened to these three people. Determined to go on rather than listen to advice, Hal, Charles, and Mercedes left Buck and Thornton to watch them in their progress:

. . . the sled was a quarter of a mile away. Dog and man watched it crawling along over the ice. Suddenly, they saw its back end drop down, as into a rut, and the gee-pole with Hal clinging to it, jerk into the air. Mercedes's scream came to their ears. They saw Charles turn and make one step to run back, and then a whole section of ice give way and dogs and humans disappear. (p. 67)

Although London included both the weak and strong types of human nature in this novel, his animal characters still seem more believable than the people. Perhaps this is because he

. . . kept his story within the limits of credible animal behavior. The human beings are good or bad, efficient or useless, only to the degree that they affect the well-being of the dogs--and here indeed the brutes often rose to a stoic dignity not granted to the humans.<sup>1</sup>

To the theme of the superman in The Call of the Wild, London has added ideas of a biological determinism. This type of determinism emphasizes heredity rather than environment as the controlling and shaping force in the life of an individual. Most naturalists emphasized either socioeconomic

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<sup>1</sup>Maxwell Geismar, Rebels and Ancestors (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1953), p. 149.

determinism or biological determinism in their works, but London seems to have made use of both types in this novel, for Buck, the hero, is clearly shaped by both his environment and his heredity.

That Buck could become the superdog, the leader of a wolf pack, is a result of his parentage, London would have us believe. For Buck inherited his great size and weight from his St. Bernard father and his intelligence from both of his parents. But London emphasized biological determinism in this novel even more clearly through the inclusion of references to atavism. Even the four lines at the beginning of the story were well chosen by London to make the point that the primitive self lies close to the surface:

"Old longings nomadic leap,  
Chafing at custom's chain;  
Again from its brumal sleep  
Wakens the ferine strain." (p. 1)

Throughout the rest of the story, London included references to Buck's reversion to the features and characteristics of his primitive ancestors. One of the first examples was the wild surge of fear that Buck felt when he awoke to find himself completely buried in the snow on his first night in the Yukon. London emphasized this great fear as a "token" that Buck

. . . was harking back through his own life to the lives of his forebears, for he was a civilized dog, an unduly civilized dog, and of his own experience knew no trap and so could not of himself fear it. The muscles of his whole body contracted spasmodically and instinctively,

the hair on his neck and shoulders stood on end, and with a ferocious snarl he bounded straight up into the blinding day, snow flying about him in a flashing flood. (pp. 17-18)

Buck progressed rapidly by learning from the other dogs and from his masters, but he had old instincts to fall back upon. Some of these instincts had never been brought to life in him as a domesticated animal; now they came easily to the surface in this land of the primitive. Buck found that

It was no task for him to learn to fight with cut and slash and the quick wolf snap. In this manner had fought forgotten ancestors. They quickened the old life within him, and the old tricks which they had stamped into the heredity of the breed were his tricks. They came to him without effort or discovery, as though they had been his always. (p. 22)

Just as Buck learned to fight in the wolf manner instinctively, so also he learned to point his nose at a star and howl the ancient wolf howl. He had hardships to overcome before he could become like the wolf, for he had "softened during the many generations since the day his last wild ancestor was tamed by a cave-dweller or river man" (p. 29).

When the wild huskies lifted their voices in a nocturnal song, however, Buck found himself joining them involuntarily. He could not explain why he was so stirred by this song, but

When he moaned and sobbed, it was with the pain of living that was of old the pain of his wild fathers, and the fear and mystery of the cold and dark that was to them fear and mystery. And that he should be stirred by it marked the completeness with which he harked back through the ages of fire and roof to the raw beginnings of life in the howling ages. (pp. 33-34)

Another instinct long dead in Buck rose to the surface. He began to feel the urge to kill, for even this seemed familiar

to him. When the fight with Spitz began, "to Buck it was nothing new or strange, this scene of old time. It was as though it had always been, the wonted way of things" (p. 37). The battle for survival had been the same down through the ages.

With the theme of atavism in this novel, London combined allusions to the theory of evolution. He used fire as the symbol which brought atavistic dreams to Buck's mind. When Buck was lying by the fire, he thought of his home in California, but more often he remembered things which seemed familiar but which he had never seen before. Buck could see another man in his dreams, a man who did not stand erect, a man with much hair on his body. The man seemed perpetually afraid, and Buck would awaken from his dream afraid, too. His dreams of this man came more and more frequently,

And akin to the visions of the hairy man was the call still sounding in the depths of the forest. It filled him with a great unrest and strange desires. It caused him to feel a vague, sweet gladness, and he was aware of wild yearnings and stirrings for he knew not what. (p. 87)

Thus it is that even London's title, The Call of the Wild, is linked with his atavistic ideas, for Buck began to feel strange impulses which he could not control, impulses to rejoin the wild, for

He was older than the days he had seen and the breaths he had drawn. He linked the past with the present, and the eternity behind him throbbed through him in a mighty rhythm to which he swayed as the tides and seasons swayed. He sat by John Thornton's fire, a broad-breasted dog,

white-fanged and long-furred; but behine him were the shades of all manner of dogs, half-wolves and wild wolves. . . . (p. 72)

Because London emphasized a biological determinism in Buck's life, he prepared the reader for Buck's eventual reversion to a creature resembling his ancestor, the wolf. No pressures caused Buck to go wild; so in a sense he was just reverting back to a natural state. London made it seem right and for the best that Buck join his wild brothers, for

Buck was wildly glad. He knew he was at last answering the call, running by the side of his wood brother toward the place from where the call surely came. . . . He had done this thing before, somewhere in that other and dimly remembered world, and he was doing it again now, running free in the open, the unpacked earth underfoot, the wide sky overhead. (p. 90)

According to Alfred Kazin, London himself believed it was right for Buck to do this, for Buck represented "the triumphant natural man"--Jack London himself.<sup>1</sup>

Another aspect of naturalism, a fidelity to detail, was exhibited by Jack London in The Call of the Wild. In the beginning pages of the book, London carefully described Buck's life and his home on the ranch in California. He painted a picture of grandeur and spaciousness with his description of the place:

The house was approached by gravelled driveways which wound about through wide-spreading lawns and under the interlacing boughs of tall poplars. . . . There were great stables, where a dozen grooms and boys held forth, rows of vine-clad servants' cottages, an endless and

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<sup>1</sup>On Native Grounds (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1942), p. 112.

orderly array of outhouses, long grape arbors, green pastures, orchards, and berry patches. (pp. 1-2)

London used this careful description of Buck's former home to emphasize the contrast of it with his new home, the primitive land.

But it was in Buck's life in the Yukon that London demonstrated a true interest in detail. He carefully explained how the dogs managed to find a place to sleep under the snow, and he showed how the old sled dogs taught the new ones how to pull in the traces. Each dog was carefully described and given a personality. London described one dog this way:

By evening Perrault had secured another dog, an old husky, long and lean and gaunt, with a battle-scarred face and a single eye which flashed a warning of prowess that commanded respect. He was called Sol-leks, which means the Angry One. Like Dave, he asked nothing, gave nothing, expected nothing: and when he marched slowly and deliberately into their midst, even Spitz left him alone. (p. 16)

Another time, London explained in detail the process that was necessary to thaw out the dogs when they fell through the ice:

Once, the sled broke through, with Dave and Buck, and they were half-frozen and all but drowned by the time they were dragged out. The usual fire was necessary to save them. They were coated solidly with ice, and the two men kept them on the run around the fire, sweating and thawing, so close that they were singed by the fire. (p. 28)

Like the true naturalist, London demonstrated a deep interest in nature in The Call of the Wild. He placed his hero in a wild, untamed land where he could roam with freedom to go where he pleased. To London, nature was beautiful, and

he revealed this in his description:

It was beautiful spring weather, but neither dogs nor humans were aware of it. . . . The whole long day was a blaze of sunshine. The ghostly winter silence had given way to the great spring murmur of awakening life. . . . The sap was rising in the pines. The willows and aspens were bursting out in young buds. . . . Crickets sang in the nights, and in the days all manner of creeping, crawling things rustled forth into the sun. (p. 63)

But London also emphasized that nature was strong and to be feared, for it manifested itself in "driving snow, a wind that cut like a white-hot knife, and darkness" (p. 24). But perhaps London's intense interest in nature is best demonstrated by the theme of the story itself: Buck's eventual return to nature. London emphasized that Buck knew instinctively that the free life was better than the civilized one, that roaming wild was to be preferred over being a "work-beast." Since London himself reminded us that The Call of the Wild was to be an allegory, it is easy to put Jack London in Buck's place. Perhaps we can agree with Alfred Kazin, who said:

Yet it is good to remember that in at least one of his books that are still read today, The Call of the Wild, Jack London lives forever in the cold clear light of his life's purpose. For what is it but Jack London's own liberation from the pack of men in their competitive society that Buck, the Nietzschean hound, traces as he runs the pack out to forage alone in the wilderness? There, on the Alaskan heights, was Jack London's greatest burst of splendor . . . .<sup>1</sup>

So naturalism was demonstrated in various ways in Jack London's The Call of the Wild. Elements of romanticism

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<sup>1</sup>P. 116.

are evident, however, which prevent it from being a completely naturalistic work, such as the scenes between Buck and Thornton. Concerning this aspect, one critic has written:

Probably the episodes that take place in "civilization" are weakest in The Call of the Wild, and there was a sentimental relationship between Buck and John Thornton; but even there London showed a warmth and delicacy of affection that was not often displayed in the world of men's affairs.<sup>1</sup>

This was the work which made him famous, and it is the work which keeps him in the minds of men today. But he has admirers in countries other than America:

Abroad, now as during his life, he is perhaps even more widely read; in Great Britain and on the Continent he is regarded as one of the more durable American writers, a primitive Hemingway, a legitimate ancestor of Steinbeck, a foreshadowing of O'Neill (who acknowledged London as his chief source of information). In Soviet as well as Czarist Russia he has always been one of the most widely read American writers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Geismar, pp. 152-153.

<sup>2</sup>O'Connor, p. 6.

### CHAPTER III

#### NATURALISM IN SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF JACK LONDON

Although The Call of the Wild continues to be Jack London's best-selling work, several of his short stories remain favorites, too. Most high-school students today come into contact with at least one of his short stories in their American literature classes. Usually "To Build a Fire" is the story chosen, and once this story is read, its intense drama leads the student to discover more of London's stories. For Jack London was indeed a story-teller, and in Martin Eden he revealed what he felt to be the goal of a story-teller:

It is a great task to transmute feeling and sensation into speech, written or spoken, that will, in turn, in him who reads or listens, transmute itself back into the self-same feeling and sensation. It is a lordly task.<sup>1</sup>

Many critics feel that London attained his goal and performed this "lordly task" in his short stories, if not in his novels. What makes his short stories better or more appealing than his other works? They seem rather unpolished and lacking in subtlety, too, at times, but there is an underlying honesty about them. In these stories, London wrote with a striking vividness, utilizing settings which almost invariably have

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<sup>1</sup>(New York: The Review of Reviews Company, 1917), p. 121.

both a naturalistic and a romantic appeal. Often he simply described the loneliness of man's life. But the greatest appeal of his stories surely lies in the realism which permeates them. London emphasized the themes and ideas of naturalism in these short stories just as he did in his novels. Again he portrayed man as "an animal engaged in the endless and brutal struggle for survival,"<sup>1</sup> always battling against something, whether it be with man or animal, bitter cold or ravaging hunger.

London was a master in the use of conflict between two forces in a plot, providing his stories with a spirit of suspense and adventure rare in most short stories. He made use of the four basic conflicts: man against nature, man against man, man against society, and man against himself. He seems to have deliberately searched for situations to illustrate the major conflicts faced by man in his struggle for survival.

Thus it is that Jack London's best short stories seem to revolve around a central naturalistic theme: the struggle for survival. But there are other aspects of naturalism evident in these stories, too, notably the emphasis on nature, environment, and heredity.

"To Build a Fire" is probably London's best-known short story, but few people know that he wrote two versions

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<sup>1</sup>William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook To Literature (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1936), p. 303.

of this story. An explanation of why he used the same theme twice is found in one of London's letters to R. W. Guilder, where London wrote:

A long, long time ago I wrote a story for boys which I sold to the Youth's Companion. It was purely juvenile in treatment; its motif was not only very strong, but was very true. Man after man in the Klondike has died alone after getting his feet wet, through failure to build a fire. As the years went by, I was worried by the inadequate treatment I had given that motif, and by the fact that I had treated it for boys merely. At last came the resolve to take the same motif and handle it for men.<sup>1</sup>

From the beginning of the story, it is evident that this is a naturalistic story, for immediate emphasis is placed on a socioeconomic determinism. London describes the setting in such a way as to leave no doubt that the major theme is to be man engaged in a struggle for survival. The setting is the Yukon, and the temperature is seventy-five degrees below zero. London places his main character in this harsh environment with only a dog for company. He emphasizes the extreme cold by mentioning the fact that spittle "crackled in the air."<sup>2</sup> Nature is strong and the man should fear it.

London draws his main character for this story very carefully. The man was on his way home across the snow and

<sup>1</sup>Letters from Jack London, King Hendricks and Irving Shepard, editors (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1965), p. 274.

<sup>2</sup>Jack London, The Best Short Stories of Jack London (Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, 1967), p. 14. All stories are found in this book, and all subsequent references are to this edition.

ice of the Klondike alone. He had been warned that a man should not travel alone in such weather, but he felt confidence in himself. London makes use of another conflict here, one between the man and himself. Had he been a different type of man, he could have survived. But this man, because of his heredity, seemed to be his own worst enemy, for he felt a sense of superiority to his environment.

London emphasizes the man's supreme confidence in himself to such an extent that it seemed his most serious fault. After the man managed to light a fire when he stopped to eat his biscuits, he felt he could cope with any danger. The same triumphant feeling returned when he managed to light another fire after getting his feet wet. Sitting in front of a warm fire, he felt safe.

He remembered the advice of the old-timer on Sulphur Creek, and smiled. The old-timer had been very serious about laying down the law that no man should travel alone in the Klondike after fifty below. Well, here he was; he had had the accident; he was alone; and he had saved himself. These old timers were rather womanish, some of them, he thought. All a man had to do was to keep his head, and he was all right. (p. 21)

This man had the personality of the strong type of character usually portrayed by naturalists, but yet he was a different type of man. London describes him as having no imagination, and one remembers that imagination was the trait that made for greatness in the superdog, Buck. The man continually showed poor judgment, and he was "not much given to thinking" (p. 16). While he was thinking proudly of his accomplishment

in lighting the fires, the unexpected happened. Horrified, he watched as the snow from the spruce tree fell and extinguished his fire. Nature now became more formidable to him as he began to realize his own helplessness. For the first time, he became aware of his own isolation, and fear came to him. After many attempts, he finally got another fire going, only to have it die. Fear now began to turn to despair, and in this way Jack London emphasizes how man's environment could change him. The wild idea came to the man to entice the dog near to him; he thought he could kill him and use his fur to keep warm. Realizing finally that he lacked the physical strength to do this, he relinquished the idea. It seemed only natural that he should panic at last, and this he did, running blindly up the trail. Gradually he resigned himself to the fact that the bitter cold was going to win:

Then the man drowsed off into what seemed to him the most comfortable and satisfying sleep he had ever known. The dog sat facing him and waiting. The brief day drew to a close in a long, slow twilight. There were no signs of a fire to be made, and, besides, never in the dog's experience had it known man to sit like that in the snow and make no fire. (p. 28)

Thus in his struggle for survival with the elements, the man lost, for he had neither the experience nor the imagination needed to win.

Another aspect of naturalism evident in this short story is the fidelity to detail. London carefully describes the process the man has to go through to try to light a fire,

and this carefulness lends great realism:

In his effort to separate one match from the others, the whole bunch fell in the snow. He tried to pick it out of the snow, but failed. The dead fingers could neither touch nor clutch. He was very careful. . . . He watched, using the sense of vision in place of that of touch, and when he saw his fingers on each side the bunch, he closed them--that is, he willed to close them, for the wires were down, and fingers did not obey. (p. 23)

The man had such problems trying to pick up one match that he decided to try to light them all. Again London explains what happens with much care:

Then he scratched the bunch along his leg. It flared into flame, seventy sulphur matches at once! There was no wind to blow them out. He kept his head to one side to escape the strangling fumes, and held the blazing bunch to the birch bark. As he so held it, he became aware of sensation in his hand. His flesh was burning. He could smell it. Deep down below the surface he could feel it. . . . And still he endured it, holding the flame of the matches clumsily to the bark that would not light readily because his own burning hands were in the way, absorbing most of the flame. (p. 24)

Another example of close detail is found in London's description of the man's habit of chewing tobacco:

The result was that a crystal beard of the color and solidity of amber was increasing its length on his chin. If he fell down it would shatter itself, like glass, into brittle fragments. But he did not mind the appendage. It was the penalty all tobacco chewers paid in that country. (p. 15)

London also includes some fine descriptions of nature in this story. He uses local color to describe but not for the sake of description alone. Rather, he uses the locality in this story to create "an atmosphere which will intensify the action and harmonize with the mood of the story."<sup>1</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup>John Nichol, "The Role of 'Local Color' in Jack London's Alaskan Wilderness Tales," Western Review, VI (Winter 1969), 54.

extreme cold did indeed intensify the action in this story. London's final point seems to have been that the materialistic man fails where an imaginative man might have won. This man had failed to follow a law of his environment, one that admonished man to always travel with a companion. The bitter cold of the Klondike conquered the over-confident man.

"Love of Life" in many ways parallels this story in its naturalistic aspects and the use of a same basic theme. However, it seems to present an even clearer view of man against the elements in the eternal struggle for survival. Again London introduces a nameless man as the main character, a man who is deserted by his partner because he has a sprained ankle and cannot keep up. The whole countryside is covered with ice and snow, making the path even more tedious for the limping man. His environment presents him with other problems, too. He has had no food for two days, and he is feeling the biting pains of hunger. He begins searching frantically for anything that looks edible. London describes the plight of the man from yet another aspect:

He dried his wet footgear by the fire. The moccasins were in soggy shreds. The blanket socks were worn through in places, and his feet were raw and bleeding. His ankle was throbbing, and he gave it an examination. It had swollen to the size of his knee. (p. 151)

The next day his hunger grows even greater, although his strength is beginning to fail. By accident, he discovers some rock ptarmigan and begins stalking them. Intent upon catching them, he pays no attention to the fact that he is

leaving a trail of blood from the cuts the rocks are giving him. Though his fever for food has reached limitless bounds, he realizes he cannot catch the ptarmigan. Then he turns his attention to the possibility of catching some fish. Seeing some minnows in a clear pool, he begins feverishly to empty the pool of water. After completely emptying it, he realizes that the fish have escaped into a larger pool through a crevice. The following day, quite by accident, he stumbles upon a ptarmigan nest and falls into it.

There are four newly hatched chicks, a day old--little specks of pulsating life no more than a mouthful; and he ate them ravenously, thrusting them alive into his mouth and crunching them like eggshells between his teeth. (p. 156)

London goes on to describe to what lengths this man goes to appease his hunger. He is struggling for his life against his harsh environment. He picks up bones that wolves have already torn the meat from, and he thrusts them in his mouth to suck the last remnants of meat from them. Then he crushes them between rocks and swallows the powdery substance. As if this were not enough, London gives him another aspect of nature against which to fight. A sick wolf begins to follow him. A contest grows up between the man and the wolf; the winner will be the one who can outlast the other.

London continually describes nature in this story as a powerful force, one to be feared. This man in the story knows what he is doing, however, and he recognizes the danger

he is in:

Again his gaze completed the circle of the world about him. It was not a heartening spectacle. Everywhere was soft sky line. The hills were all low-lying. There were no trees, no shrubs, no grasses--naught but a tremendous and terrible desolation that sent fear swiftly dawning into his eyes. (p. 148)

From the beginning of this story, London leads one to think that perhaps this man has a chance to survive where the man in "To Build a Fire" did not. He describes the man as having a "patience which comes of hardship long endured" (p. 147). Again London mentions that he is a "strong man in distress" (p. 148), and he shows how the man can manage to overcome his fear and pull himself together. This man has some experience in trying to survive in this environment, and he has some imagination, too. He knows he must have some food; so he eats berries and roots and anything he can find. London makes it clear that this is a man who will not give up. London shows this man is fit to survive in several ways. First, the man is very careful with his matches:

He unwrapped his pack and the first thing he did was to count his matches. There were sixty-seven. He counted them three times to make sure. He divided them into several portions, wrapping them in oil paper, disposing of one bunch in his empty tobacco pouch, of another bunch in the inside band of his battered hat, of a third bunch under his shirt on the chest. (pp. 150-151)

The man knows that the gold he is carrying is getting to be too much for him to stagger along with; so he divides it and leaves part of it. Most men would probably have carried the gold with them until the end.

London emphasizes the struggle for survival clearly in a final way when he describes the man's plight with the wolf following him:

Once, glancing back, he saw the wolf licking hungrily his bleeding trail, and he saw sharply what his own end might be--unless--unless he could get the wolf. Then began as grim a tragedy of existence as was ever played--a sick man that crawled, a sick wolf that limped, two creatures dragging their dying carcasses across the desolation and hunting each other's lives. (p. 163)

London also exhibits another characteristic of naturalism in this story, that of careful description and detail. He describes so clearly that one feels he is almost walking with the man through the Yukon:

The bottom of the valley was soggy with water, which the thick moss held, spongelike, close to the surface. This water squirted out from under his feet at every step, and each time he lifted a foot the action culminated in a sucking sound as the wet moss reluctantly released its grip. (p. 149)

He adds much realism to his story by the descriptions and explanations, especially in the matter of the man's search for food.

He had not eaten for two days; for a far longer time he had not had all he wanted to eat. Often he stooped and picked pale muskeg berries, put them into his mouth, and chewed and swallowed them. A muskeg berry is a bit of seed enclosed in a bit of water. In the mouth the water melts away and the seed chews sharp and bitter. The man knew there was no nourishment in the berries, but he chewed them patiently with a hope greater than knowledge. (p. 150)

Thus it is that Jack London again illustrates naturalism in "Love of Life." He emphasizes nature and its great strength in comparison to the weakness of man. Once again he shows

life as a constant struggle for survival in an environment which could shape man into a different human being.

Nature forced this man back to a primitive state of animalism. He was forced to stalk his prey just as primitive man did. But, by combining imagination, experience, and an undying desire to live, the man saved himself through his own ingenuity. Perhaps this story is one of London's better stories because his emphasis is so clear in it. For, as Maxwell Geismar wrote in Rebels and Ancestors,

"Love of Life" was typical of a series of London's stories in this vein: the solitary, obsessed individual; the self-enclosed world; the macabre struggle for survival; the ironic note of "success" which obliterates everything the individual has strived for. It is probably the best of these stories, in the concentration of mood, the series of images and symbols of frustration and impotence, the coloring of fear, as London said, "that lies twisted about life's deepest roots."<sup>1</sup>

Another story in this collection, "The Law of Life," is also an example of naturalism. In this short story, London tells of the approach of death to old Koskoosh, who is abandoned by his tribe to face death alone. The old man realizes how near death is to him, yet the thought still frightens him. For the last time, he hears the sounds of the tribe packing up and pulling out. All too soon, he is left alone with his thoughts and his few sticks of wood. Sitting there in the absolute silence, he thinks about the death which is fast approaching.

He did not complain. It was the way of life, and it was just. He had been born close to the earth, close to the

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<sup>1</sup>(Houghton Mifflin Company, 1953), p. 188.

earth had he lived, and the law thereof was not new to him. Nature was not kindly to the flesh. She had no concern for that concrete thing called the individual. Her interest lay in the species, the race. (p. 111)

London clearly emphasizes nature in this story, but the old man seems to be fighting against an abstract concept of nature rather than the elements of nature. Old Koskoosh is actually fighting against what he feels to be the law of life, that one will have to die, for

But one task did Nature set the individual. Did he not perform it, he died. Did he perform it, it was all the same, he died. Nature did not care; there were plenty who were obedient, and it was only the obedience in this matter, not the obedient, which lived and lived always. (p. 111)

The setting of this story is the Yukon once again, and into this naturalistic environment London has placed a man in a struggle for survival. London himself later wrote that he considered this to be one of his better stories because

It is short, applies the particular to the universal, deals with a lonely death, of an old man, in which beasts consummate the tragedy. . . . What point of view do I take? Why, the old Indian's, of course. . . . The reader listens with him to every familiar sound; hears the last draw away; feels the silence settle down.<sup>1</sup>

"An Odyssey of the North" also contains many naturalistic elements. London includes some very fine nature descriptions in this story, using them to add dimension to his tale. He tells of how Malemute Kid opens his door to a knock, and a man made unrecognizable by frostbite and starvation stumbles in.

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<sup>1</sup>Letters From Jack London, p. 115.

Kid and his partner give food to the man, and while he is eating, they have an opportunity to study him. They gaze in awe at what the Klondike environment has done to him:

The creature's eyes were alight with a somber frenzy, which blazed and waned with every mouthful. There was very little skin to the face. The face, for that matter, sunken and emaciated, bore little resemblance to human countenance. Frost after frost had bitten deeply, each depositing its stratum of scab upon the half-healed scar that went before. This dry, hard surface was of a bloody-black color, serrated by grievous cracks wherein the raw red flesh peeped forth. His skin garments were dirty and in tatters, and the fur of one side was singed and burned away, showing where he had lain upon his fire. (p. 39)

London emphasizes determinism in this story once again when he describes what this environment has shaped members of the Mounted Police into:

They were of many breeds, but their common life had formed of them a certain type--a lean and wiry type, with trail-hardened muscles, and sun-browned faces, and untroubled souls which gazed frankly forth, clear-eyed and steady. (p. 30)

To further develop the naturalistic theme of the struggle for survival, London adds a second conflict to the story, that of man against man. Thus, London allows Naass to tell his story of revenge. Naass was a chief of his people, and on what was to be his wedding day, a strange ship came to the beach of Akatan and the captain took Naass's bride away. At this point London begins to emphasize the response this man makes to internal forces and drives; he has to find this captain, Axel Gunderson, and get the beautiful woman, Unga, back. So Naass begins his search immediately, wandering through a

thousand cities, until finally he meets them in Dawson. Agreeing to serve as a guide for them, Naass goes with them in search of gold. London emphasizes how this man was driven by a desire for revenge to kill Gunderson by explaining how he moves the caches they hide so it will look as if wolves are doing it. By the time they reach the gold, they are out of food and must begin the long journey back to Dawson.

Naass is driven by something within him to kill Gunderson, but he is not going to fight him. Instead, he decides to let nature do the work for him, in the form of hunger and cold. But the revenge is not a sweet one for him after all, for Unga elects to remain in the cold by the dead body of her husband rather than leave with the man responsible for his death.

London includes yet another aspect of naturalism in "An Odyssey of the North." He introduces Axel Gunderson as a "blond beast" or superman figure, by describing him as being seven feet tall and weighing three hundred pounds. London writes of him:

To bear his three hundred pounds of bone and muscle, his snowshoes were greater by a generous yard than those of other men. Rough-hewn, with rugged brow and massive jaw and unflinching eyes of palest blue, his face told the tale of one who knew but the law of might. Of the yellow of ripe corn silk, his frost-incrusted hair swept like day across the night and fell far down his coat of bearskin. (p. 36)

Again London refers to Gunderson as a "man such as the gods have almost forgotten how to fashion" (p. 35), and he proceeds

to show the man's strength through Naass's words:

He was a great man. His soul lifted his body to the last; nor did he cry aloud, save for the sake of Unga. . . . That night he was near gone; but in the morning he swore weakly and went forth again. He was like a drunken man, and I looked many times for him to give up, but his was the strength of the strong, and his soul the soul of a giant. . . . (p. 54)

Gunderson attempted to rise above the accepted morals by stealing Naass's bride, but he did not win in the end.

Richard O'Connor wrote that following the publication of "An Odyssey of the North," London was praised by conservative as well as liberal critics. The story was lauded for its masterful descriptions of the North Country. O'Connor wrote that London "was being compared to Kipling as an apostle of the heroic and a minstrel of brave men contending with a savage environment."<sup>1</sup>

London emphasizes the strength of nature in "The Heathen," also. He changes the setting, placing man aboard a pearling vessel in the midst of a hurricane. London's experience on the sea provided him with much descriptive power in this passage:

Wind? Out of all my experience, I could not have believed it possible for the wind to blow as it did. There is no describing it. How can one describe a nightmare? It was the same way with that wind. It tore the clothes off our bodies. I say "tore them off" and I mean it. I am not asking you to believe it. I am merely telling you something I saw myself. I went through it, and that is enough. One could not face that wind and live. It was a monstrous thing, and the most monstrous thing about it was that it continued to increase. (p. 94)

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<sup>1</sup> Jack London: A Biography (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1964), p. 141.

After the wind comes the lull. Absolute quiet prevails, and the seas begin to rise. Waves over eighty feet high splash and careen over the schooner, finally tearing it apart, flinging the men overboard.

Nature becomes even more formidable now as Charley and the heathen, Otoo, have another battle on their hands. They must survive the threat of the calm sea by hanging on to a piece of the ship hatch. With much realism, London describes their method of staying alive, with Charley as his mouthpiece:

We took turn and turn about, lying flat on the cover and resting, while the other, submerged to the neck, merely held on with his hands. For two days and two nights, spell and spell, on the cover and in the water, we drifted over the ocean. . . . Our continuous immersion prevented us from dying of thirst, though the sea water and sunshine gave us the prettiest imaginable combination of salt pickle and sunburn. (p. 98)

But their struggle for survival is not ended yet as London reminds the reader by involving the men with another terror of the sea, the shark. In this passage of the story, Charley and Otoo are in a small native craft rowing out to the schooner. Because of overcrowded conditions, the craft capsizes, throwing the men into the water. Immediately sharks begin circling about them.

Otoo is London's strong character in this story. He is described as standing six feet tall and as having muscles to thrill a gladiator. Because he is a heathen, he believes in no life after death and is thus a picture of a materialistic man. He never runs from a fight, and he gives up his

life for his friend.

"The Pearls of Parlay" also exhibits aspects of naturalism. London once again has men facing the terrors of the sea, this time in the form of an oncoming typhoon. The men know it is coming by the low barometer reading and by the suffocating heat. All of the men leave Parlay's house for their boats to get them out to sea so they will not be destroyed on the coast. London reveals his descriptive ability once again in these words:

The sea, white with fury, boiled in tiny, spitting wavelets. The deck of the "Malahini" vibrated under their feet. The taut-stretched halyards beat a tattoo against the masts, and all the rigging, as if smitten by some mighty hand, set up a wild drumming. It was impossible to face that wind and live. (p. 182)

Then London carefully describes the effects of the hurricane on the land:

The grass sheds had disappeared and Parlay's house rocked drunkenly. Because the wind blew lengthwise along the atoll, the house had been sheltered by the miles of coconut trees; but the big seas, breaking across from outside, were undermining it and hammering it to pieces. Already tilted down the slope of sand, its end was imminent. Here and there in the coconut trees people had lashed themselves. The trees did not sway and thresh about. Bent over rigidly by the wind, they remained in that position and vibrated monstrosly. Underneath, across the sand, surged the white spume of the breakers. (p. 183)

So this story, too, emphasizes the struggle for survival against nature. However, London introduces a second conflict, one of man against himself. Old Parlay has become a miser with his pearls and he hates white men. He knows that a big typhoon is going to hit the island; so he invites all

the big pearling schooners there for a pearling auction. He is greedy, and he desires the death of all of these men.

In "Lost Face," London once again shows man in a struggle for survival, this time against society. Subienkow is facing a society of Nulato Indians. He and a mutilated Cossack are the only surviving prisoners, and the Cossack is barely hanging on to a thread of life through the hideous tortures inflicted upon him by the Indian women. The irony of the story exists in the fact that he had treated these Indians in much the same way when he had had the opportunity. He had forced the Indians to build a fort, and he had whipped those who would not work. Those who ran away were captured and spread-eagled before the others as an example. But now the fort is gone, burned by these same Indians, and they are waiting to take their revenge on Subienkow.

In this story, London also emphasizes determinism or fate. Subienkow knows what these Indians will do to him, and he has no desire to face the torture. Yet he has a feeling that this is how it is meant to be, for

From the beginning, when he dreamed the fiery dream of Poland's independence, he had become a puppet in the hands of fate. From the beginning, at Warsaw, at St. Petersburg, in the Siberian mines, in Kamchatka, on the crazy boats of the fur thieves, fate had been driving him to this end. Without doubt, in the foundation of the world was graved this end for him. . . . Before he was dreamed of, it had been determined that the quivering bundle of sensitiveness that constituted him should be doomed to live in raw and howling savagery, and die in this far land of night, in this dark place beyond the last boundaries of the world.  
(p. 59-60)

Feeling in this way and realizing that he has nothing to lose, Subienkow makes a deal with the Indians, and manages to outwit them by tricking them to chop his head off, thus saving himself from great torture.

While examining the previously-discussed stories as examples of naturalism, perhaps one can agree with Irving Stone that they marked the beginning of the modern American short story. He wrote:

It had antecedents in Edgar Allan Poe, Bret Harte, Stephen Crane, and Ambrose Bierce, who had all broken with the conventional pattern to write authentic literature, but Jack was the first to bring the story home to the common people, to make it entirely understandable and enjoyable.<sup>1</sup>

"The Wit of Porportuk" is another story in the naturalistic vein, emphasizing conflict between a man and a woman. It is the story of a young Indian girl, El-Soo, who is called home from the mission school by her father. He is overly fond of good times, good food, and revelry, and he likes to give feasts. As he does not have the money for this, he borrows heavily from the richest Indian on the Yukon, old Porportuk. When El-Soo's father dies, Porportuk decides he will take El-Soo as his wife as payment of the debt. Because she loves another, she engages in a battle of wits with Porportuk to get out of debt.

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<sup>1</sup>Jack London, Sailor On Horseback (New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1966), p. 132.

London includes a fine descriptive passage in this story, too, beginning with mention of the auction:

From afar came the faint cries of myriads of wild fowl on the nesting grounds. Swallows were skimming up overhead from the placid surface of the Yukon, and robins were singing. The oblique rays of the hidden sun shot through the smoke, high-dissipated from forest fires a thousand miles away, and turned the heavens to somber red, while the earth shone red in the reflected glow. (p. 136)

With such a description in mind, I think we can agree that in Jack London's work,

We can expect to feel vigor, the driving energy of Jack London surging through the action, the characterization, the movement of the words. We can expect to find descriptions that, however much they may be overwritten, do evoke their scenes. And we may expect to respond with whatever atavistic qualities we may have to tales of brutal men and their heroic adventures.<sup>1</sup>

"A Piece of Steak" reveals man once again engaged in a struggle for survival. This story utilizes the rare instance of man physically fighting against another man for the main conflict in the story. It is the story of Tom King, who has put many years of service into the ring. Tonight he must face a younger man in the ring, Sandel. This is the surface conflict, but London inserts another one, that of man against himself. King is really fighting age. He recalls other days, when he was

Youth, rising; and they were Age, sinking. No wonder it had been easy--they with their swollen veins and battered knuckles and weary in the bones of them from the long

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<sup>1</sup>Granville Hicks, The Great Tradition: An Interpretation of American Literature Since the Civil War (New York: International Publishers, 1933), p. 196.

battles they had already fought. He remembered the time he put out old Stowsher Bill, at Rush-Cutters Bay, in the eighteenth round, and how old Bill had cried afterward in the dressing room like a baby. . . . He could see now, after he had gone through the mill himself, that Stowsher Bill had fought for a bigger stake, that night twenty years ago, than had young Tom King, who had fought for glory and easy money. (p. 75)

London emphasizes the animal nature of man in this story, too. King is a fighter, and his face shows "all the marks of the fighting beast" (p. 71). London further describes him using animal imagery by this statement: "Sheer animal that he was, the eyes were the most animallike feature about him. They were sleepy, lionlike--the eyes of a fighting animal" (p. 72).

The theme of the survival of the fittest is also a prevalent one in this story. Tom King is old and tired, but he has experience. He remembers a time when he played upon his opponent's weakness, breaking the man's jaw which had just healed. He did this, "not because he bore the Gouger any ill will," but because "it was the game, and both knew the game and played it" (p. 72).

King's present opponent, Sandel, radiates youth and energy. London leaves no doubt that this man is physically fit:

Sandel was in and out, here, there, and everywhere, light-footed and eager-hearted, a living wonder of white flesh and stinging muscle that wove itself into a dazzling fabric of attack, slipping and leaping like a flying shuttle from action to action through a thousand actions, all of them centered upon the destruction of Tom King, who stood between him and his fortune. (p. 79)

King remains calm and unworried, for he feels that this is the way of youth, rushing in to overpower with a wild surge of strength. He can do nothing but wait for the boy to lose some of his initial steam. Sandel symbolizes youth, and like the young, he is unmindful of the fact that he needs to save some of his strength. So King waits for him to tire.

King has only one asset, that of experience, and he thinks he can win with it. However, London shows that the strength and fitness of young Sandel cannot be overcome, for when King needs only one punch to knock out Sandel, out of all his experience, he cannot muster the strength to deliver that punch.

In "To the Man on Trail," London introduces a strong character, curiously resembling the blond beast or superman figure. He describes the stranger as a striking man, standing well over six feet, with an open and honest face. He continues his description in this way:

Though genial in conversation, and mild when at rest, the blue eyes gave promise of the hard steel-glitter which comes when called into action, especially against odds. The heavy jaw and the square-cut chin demonstrated rugged pertinacity and indomitability. (p. 119)

The setting for this story is once again the Klondike, and London emphasizes the stranger's struggle for survival against his environment and the Mounted Police. That he survives in the end is due to the fact that there is a certain honor among the men of the Klondike.

Thus it is clear that London exhibits qualities of naturalism in his short stories, for

In the Arctic wastes, when "all movement ceases, the sky clears, the heavens are as brass," London's typical figure was a voiceless traveler journeying across the ghostly white leagues of a dead world. The white silence seemed ever crushing inward, the stars danced with great leaps, while the spirits of the Pole, so London said, trailed their robes of glory athwart the heavens. Against the background of abstract splendor, these were the deeds of men's heroism, or cruelty, or the meticulous descriptions of moral and physical deterioration as in the scurvy, when muscles and joints began to swell, the flesh turned black, and gums and lips took on the color of rich cream.<sup>1</sup>

In final analysis, perhaps one can agree with the first professional criticism of a collection of London's short stories:

He uses the current slang of the mining camps a little too freely, in fact he is far from elegant, but his style has freshness, vigor, and strength. He draws a vivid picture of the terrors of cold, darkness, and starvation, the pleasures of human companionship in adverse circumstances, and the sterling qualities which the rough battle with nature brings out. The reader is convinced that the author has lived the life himself.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Geismar, pp. 144-145.

<sup>2</sup>Stone, p. 113.

## CHAPTER IV

### NATURALISM IN THE SEA WOLF

Perhaps the finest example of early naturalism in American literature can be found in Jack London's The Sea Wolf. London had been thinking of writing a sea story for some time, to be based almost entirely upon his experiences nine years before on the "Sophie Sutherland." To get the right feeling for writing this novel, he left for a week's sail on his little sailing sloop, the "Spray." And,

At the end of a week, with the sea salt in his nostrils and the feel of sail-ropes in his calloused hands, he returned home, sat down at his desk, and wrote The Sea Wolf, Chapter One. Whenever the interruptions proved too great, the friends about him too many, he put food on board the "Spray" and pushed off by himself, writing his fifteen hundred words each morning as he sat on the hatch and let the early spring sun warm his body to the pitch that his thoughts about the Sea Wolf were warming his brain.<sup>1</sup>

The main character of this novel, Wolf Larsen, is based on Captain Alex McClean, a man of "amazing exploits" which London had heard about while aboard the "Sophie Sutherland." Thus, London follows the idea of experience and research advocated by Zola for the naturalistic writer.

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<sup>1</sup>Irving Stone, Jack London, Sailor on Horseback (New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1966), p. 165.

Just how closely he relies on his own experience for his descriptive passages can be seen in a comparison of London's actual experience aboard the sealing vessel and Van Weyden's experience aboard the "Ghost." Richard O'Connor describes Jack London's actual experience nine years before his writing of The Sea Wolf:

The decks of the "Sophie" reddened with gore as the slaughtered seals were brought back to be skinned, with the carcasses thrown overboard for the delectation of the gluttoned sharks. For weeks on end he and his fellows reeked of blood, smelled it in the cold moist air, tasted it in their stew, felt it seep into their pores.<sup>1</sup>

For comparison, here is London's description of Van Weyden's experience in The Sea Wolf:

After a good day's killing, I have seen our decks covered with hides and bodies, slippery with fat and blood, the scuppers running red; masts, ropes, and rails spattered with the sanguinary color; and the men, like butchers plying their trade, naked and red of arm and hand, hard at work with ripping and flensing-knives, removing the skins from the pretty sea-creatures they had killed.<sup>2</sup>

After reading this comparison, one can agree that London's descriptions are indeed realistic.

With careful detail in the second part of the book, London describes the rigging of the masts. Hump and Maud discover that the "Ghost" has landed on Endeavor Island, that it is deserted except for Larsen, but that they cannot leave

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<sup>1</sup>Jack London: A Biography (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1964), p. 53.

<sup>2</sup>Jack London, The Sea Wolf (New York: Washington Square Press, 1967), p. 119. All subsequent references are to this edition.

the island on the ship because it has no masts. As Hump says,

There was the mainmast, fifteen inches in diameter at what was now the butt, still sixty-five feet in length, and weighing, I roughly calculated, at least three thousand pounds. And then came the foremast, larger in diameter and weighing surely thirty-five hundred pounds. Where was I to begin? Maud stood silently by my side . . . . (p. 242)

First, Hump has to devise a plan to hoist the sails, and he hits upon the idea to make his own "shears," by making a v-shaped contrivance and elevating it above the deck. To this he can attach his hoisting tackle and lift the sails. When he completes this task, London describes what is next in store for Hump and Maud:

Her task was to hold the boat in position while I worked at the tangle. And such a tangle--halyards, sheets, guys, downhauls, shrouds, stays, all washed about and back and forth and through, and twined and knotted by the sea. I cut no more than was necessary, and what with passing the long ropes under and around the booms and masts, of unreeving the halyards and sheets, of coiling down in the boat and uncoiling in order to pass through another knot in the bight, I was soon wet to the skin. (p. 243)

Another example of London's fine description can be found in the passage concerning the rescue of Humphrey Van Weyden by the ship "Ghost." Van Weyden, half drowned, is aware of what is happening to him only through sensations:

My rhythm grew shorter and shorter. I was jerked from swing to counter swing with irritating haste. I could scarcely catch my breath, so fiercely was I impelled through the heavens. The gong thundered more frequently and more furiously. I grew to await it with a nameless dread. Then it seemed as though I were being dragged over rasping sands, white and hot in the sun. (p. 9)

London then goes on to explain that Van Weyden is being revived,

and the rhythm he feels is the movement of the ship, the gong is the banging of a frying pan against the wall, and the scorching sands are a man's hands rubbing his chest.

As one can gather from reading some of London's description in The Sea Wolf, the setting is once again a naturalistic one, the sea. From the beginning of the novel, London emphasizes that this environment can be just as harsh and real as the Klondike, for it too furnishes man with trying experiences. This is shown in the opening scene, when the ships collide and Van Weyden is thrown into the sea. By emphasizing the strength of nature in the form of the storms at sea, London allows himself a chance to wonder at the littleness of man:

And oh, the marvel of it! the marvel of it! That tiny men should live and breathe and work, and drive so frail a contrivance of wood and cloth through so tremendous an elemental strife. (p. 128)

At another point in the story, London again marvels at the fact that man would venture forth on the terrible sea in so small a thing as a ship which holds only twenty-two men. He writes of the ship:

It is a very little world, a mote, a speck, and I marvel that men should dare to venture the sea on a contrivance so small and fragile. (p. 42)

But the sea can also reflect beauty, as London reminds the reader through Van Weyden's thoughts:

The days and nights are "all a wonder and a wild delight," and though I have little time from my dreary work, I steal odd moments to gaze and gaze at the unending glory of what

I never dreamed the world possessed. Above, the sky is stainless blue--blue as the sea itself, which under the forefoot is of the color and sheen of azure satin. All round the horizon are pale, fleecy clouds, never changing, never moving, like a silver setting for the flawless turquoise sky. (p. 54)

The beauty of the sea can arouse such feelings in the uncaring Wolf Larsen that he begins to recite poetry.

The setting for the second part of the book is Endeavor Island. Humphrey and Maud leave the "Ghost" in one of the small boats after Wolf Larsen makes unwanted advances toward Maud. The small boat is well-stocked by Humphrey with provisions for their flight toward Japan. With the wind behind them, Humphrey thinks they will make it to Japan, which is six hundred miles away, in about five days. Unfortunately, they must depend upon the wind, and it soon brings a storm, driving them "here and there, willy-nilly, across the ocean" (p. 206). It storms for days and nights until finally they sight land, and their boat touches the edge of the island.

Characterization within this novel is typical of naturalistic works. London includes both the weak and strong types of human nature. The cook aboard the "Ghost" is repulsive in his weakness, as Van Weyden relates:

The man who had spoken to him was clearly a Cockney, with the clean lines and weakly pretty, almost effeminate, face of the man who has absorbed the sound of Bow Bells with his mother's milk. A draggled muslin cap on his head and a dirty gunny-sack about his slim hips proclaimed him cook of the decidedly dirty ship's galley in which I found myself. (p. 6)

Wolf Larsen clearly represents the strong type in this novel. As captain of the ship he must be masterful, but something within Larsen drives him to cruelty as a demonstration of his strength. He has both mental and physical strength, but no ethics.

From the beginning of the novel, Humphrey Van Weyden is presented as a somewhat weak character, too, for he has a soft skin not unlike a woman's. He feels a certain superiority to these men and a distaste for their way of life. But like Buck in The Call of the Wild, Van Weyden is shaped by his environment into a different individual, for London once again emphasizes a socioeconomic determinism in this novel, The Sea Wolf. Van Weyden knows from the beginning that he must change if he hopes to survive in this "new and elemental environment" (p. 31). As he has not worked before, in a few days' time he can see a change in his hands as the first sign of his adapting himself:

My hands bothered me a great deal, unused as they were to work. The nails were discolored and black, while the skin was already grained with dirt which even a scrubbing-brush could not remove. The blisters came, in a painful and never-ending procession, and I had a great burn on my forearm, acquired by losing my balance in a roll of the ship and pitching against the galley stove. (pp. 45-46)

Soon Hump (as Wolf Larsen begins to call Van Weyden) finds himself in much better physical condition than ever before. His muscles are developing rapidly, and he feels added strength.

The new environment is shaping him mentally, as well as physically, and soon his attitudes and feelings begin to change. He begins to hate the cook, the weak Thomas Mugridge, because he is a cheat and a carrier of tales. London emphasizes the change in Van Weyden through these words:

For the first time in my life I experienced the desire to murder--"saw red," as some of our picturesque writers phrase it. Life in general might still be sacred, but life in the particular case of Thomas Mugridge had become very profane indeed. I was frightened when I became conscious that I was seeing red, and the thought flashed through my mind: was I, too, being tainted by the brutality of my environment?--I, who even in the most flagrant crimes had denied the justice and righteousness of capital punishment? (pp. 50-51)

Van Weyden recognizes the changes within himself; he knows he is becoming as animal-like as the other members of the crew. Once when the cook threatens him with a waving fist, Van Weyden finds himself snarling back at him:

It is no pleasant picture I can conjure up of myself, Humphrey Van Weyden, in that noisome ship's galley, crouched in a corner over my task, my face raised to the creature about to strike me, my lips lifted and snarling like a dog's, my eyes gleaming with fear and helplessness and the courage that comes of fear and helplessness. (p. 66)

The constant fights among the men on the "Ghost" do not affect Hump in the way they did at first. When Leach begins beating Mugridge, Hump even feels a sudden surge of delight. Then he begins to wonder about himself:

And I was frightened when I became conscious of the trend of my thought. The continual brutality around me was degenerative in its effect. It bid fair to destroy for me all that was best and brightest in my life. My reason dictated that the beating Thomas Mugridge had received was an ill thing, and yet for the life of me I could not prevent my soul joying in it. (p. 92)

Thus London exhibits how environment can change a man. Hump becomes a product of his environment to the extent that he too feels a desire to kill. He is changed from the gentleman writer and critic into a member of the crew on the hellship "Ghost," and his appearance changes along with his attitudes, until he realizes what he has become:

As I buttered a piece of bread my eyes chanced to rest upon my hand. The knuckles were skinned and inflamed clear across, the fingers swollen, the nails rimmed with black. I felt the mattress-like growth of beard on my neck, knew that the sleeve of my coat was ripped, that a button was missing from the throat of the blue shirt I wore. (p. 149)

He now looks the part of a crew member of the sealing vessel.

London introduces another aspect of naturalism into The Sea Wolf, too, that of biological determinism. Once again he emphasizes man's heredity as a shaping force, making several references to the reasons why Mugridge is the type of person he is. London points out that there is an air of servility about Mugridge, and he stands as though always waiting for a tip. When Hump thanks the cook for providing him with some dry clothes,

A soft light suffused his face and his eyes glistened, as though somewhere in the depths of his being his ancestors had quickened and stirred with dim memories of tips received in former lives. (p. 12)

Mugridge envies and hates Hump because he was born a gentleman.

At another point in the story, London again refers to the fact that Mugridge's life seemed planned from its

beginning. Humphrey feels sorrow for the cook's condition, for

Life had been unfair to him. It had played him a scurvy trick when it fashioned him into the thing he was, and it had played him scurvy tricks ever since. What chance had he to be anything else than he was? (p. 94)

Mugridge recognizes his fate, and he hates others who are more fortunate in life. He says,

I'm already myde an' myde out of leavin's an' scraps. It's all right for you, 'Ump. You was born a gentleman. You never knew wot it was to go 'ungry, to cry yerself asleep with yer little belly gnawin' an' gnawin', like a rat inside yer. It carn't come right. If I was President of the United States tomorrer, 'ow would it fill my belly for one time w'en I was a kiddy and it went empty? (p. 94)

London includes a hint of biological determinism in the life of Wolf Larsen, too. Larsen comes of poor, uneducated parents, and of generations of uneducated people. Perhaps his experiences have shaped him into what he is, for as he says to Hump:

What can I tell you? Of the meagreness of a child's life? of fish diet and coarse living? Of going out with the boats from the time I could crawl? Of my brothers, who went away one by one to the deep-sea farming and never came back? Of myself, unable to read or write, cabin-boy at the mature age of ten on the coastwise, old-country ships? Of the rough fare and rougher usage, where kicks and blows were bed and breakfast and took the place of speech, and fear and hatred and pain were my only soul-experiences? (p. 76)

He had taught himself to read and write and he studied various works, but because he lacked background, he could accept only the things he could apply to his own experience. Perhaps this is why Larsen has such a materialistic outlook on life.

The theme of the struggle for survival is a dominant one in The Sea Wolf. The men aboard the ship are engaged in

a constant struggle against the violent sea, with its storms, but they are also involved in a struggle against their captain and each other. These men are primitive types, and they win their arguments by force.

The animal nature of man is also emphasized throughout this novel. Traces of this can be seen even in the name of the main character, Wolf Larsen. But London allows his characters to describe Larsen in terms of an animal. The first sight Hump has of Larson impresses him with a feeling of strength:

It was a strength we are wont to associate with things primitive, with wild animals, and the creatures we imagine our tree-dwelling prototypes to have been--a savage strength, ferocious, alive in itself, the essence of life in that it is the potency of motion, the elemental stuff out of which the many forms of life have been molded; in short, that which writhes in the body of a snake when the head is cut off, and the snake, as a snake, is dead, or which lingers in a shapeless lump of turtle-meat and recoils and quivers from the prod of a finger. (p. 14)

Larsen is continually described in animal imagery in this novel. Louis, a member of the crew, refers to Wolf as a beast, "the great big beast mentioned in Revelation; an' no good end will he ever come to" (p. 43). He goes on to mention that Wolf is more than blackhearted; he has no heart at all. Louis considers him very aptly named. At another point in the story, Hump compares Wolf to a tiger:

The jungle and the wilderness lurked in the uplift and downput of his feet. He was catfooted, and lithe, and strong, always strong. I likened him to some great tiger, a beast of prowess and prey. He looked it, and the piercing glitter that arose at times in his eyes was the same

piercing glitter I had observed in the eyes of caged leopards and other preying creatures of the wild.(p. 164)

Animal imagery is used once more by London in his description of the fight between Wolf Larsen and his brother, Death Larsen. The two men go below for a little conversation, and,

Suddenly, from the cabin came a great, choking bellow, followed by all the sounds of a furious struggle. It was the leopard and the lion, and the lion made all the noise. Wolf Larsen was the leopard,(p. 178)

Why does this brutal, animalistic side of man show up so clearly in this environment, aboard the "Ghost?" It is true that Larsen as the ship's captain seems to bring out the worst in his men, but London gives another reason. He allows Hump to wonder about the mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters of these men on the ship. He feels it is unnatural for them to be separated from the influence of good women, because

Coarseness and savagery are the inevitable results. These men about me should have wives, and sisters, and daughters; then would they be capable of softness, and tenderness, and sympathy. . . . Their masculinity, which in itself is of the brute, has been overdeveloped. The other and spiritual side of their nature has been dwarfed--atrophied, in fact.(pp. 98-99)

But perhaps the best example of naturalism found in The Sea Wolf is that of the concept of the superman. Wolf Larsen is presented as this type of individual from the beginning of the novel, and one wonders if this man was not patterned after Jack London, too. For as Alfred Kazin has written, London considered himself to be strong:

He never believed in any strength equal to his, for that strength had come from his own self-assertion; and out of

his worship of strength and force came his delight in violence. He had proved himself by it, as seaman and adventurer, and it was by violence that his greatest characters came to live. For violence was their only avenue of expression in a world which, as London conceived it, was a testing ground for the strong; violence expressed the truth of life, both the violence of the naturalist creed and the violence of superior men and women.<sup>1</sup>

Whether London admired Larsen's qualities or not, it is true that Larsen is a man of tremendous physical strength, for he demonstrates to Hump how he can mash a firm, unpeeled potato in his hand with one squeeze. But Larsen also has a great inner strength, based upon a faith in his ruthless and powerful mind. He is wholly unschooled except for what he has taught himself, and he has always lived among brutal and ignorant seamen. With muscles like a gorilla and seemingly a gorilla's code of ethics, Larsen has yet another facet of personality, for he knows the Bible and he has read Herbert Spencer.

It is interesting to note that on the first page and in the first paragraph of The Sea Wolf there is a mention of Nietzsche, from whom London borrowed the idea of the superman. This seems to have been intentional on London's part, perhaps to bring the subject to the fore at once.

Nevertheless, Larsen is a prime example of the materialistic man. When asked what he believes, he answers,

I believe that life is a mess. It is like yeast, a ferment, a thing that moves and may move for a minute, an hour, a

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<sup>1</sup>On Native Grounds (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1942), p. 113.

year, or a hundred years, but that in the end will cease to move. The big eat the little that they may continue to move, the strong eat the weak that they may regain their strength. The lucky eat the most and move the longest, that is all. (pp. 38-39)

Since this is what life is to him, a "piggishness" displayed by every man, Larsen cannot believe in immortality, for "of what use or end is an immortality of piggishness?" (p. 39). He believes that the concept of immortality is a creation of man, and another example of his piggishness, for man wants to live always. He points out to Van Weyden that if he is so certain of immortality, why is it that he is afraid to die?

What then is the value of life to Wolf Larsen? He feels that life has no value at all; it is the cheapest thing on earth. For, he says, "Nature spills it out with a lavish hand. Where there is room for one life, she sows a thousand lives, and it's life eats life till the strongest and most piggish life is left" (p. 51). Since Larsen feels human life has no value, he does not feel it is wrong to destroy human life.

Larsen continues on to say that any joy he has in living does not come from God. Rather, he feels that

It is what comes when there is nothing wrong with one's digestion, when his stomach is in trim and his appetite has an edge, and all goes well. It is the bribe for living, the champagne of the blood, the effervescence of the ferment--that makes men think holy thoughts, and other men to see God or to create Him when they cannot see Him. (p. 55)

London's development of the cult of brutality in this novel stems naturally from the ideas of the man Larsen. He has no misgivings as to the value of human life; he attempts to destroy it when he so desires. He feels no qualms when he brutally hits a young cabin boy in the stomach to help him decide to follow orders, nor does he feel remorse when he kicks Hump violently for a mistake Hump made while dumping ashes. At another time, he forces a young and inexperienced boy to perform a hazardous deed eighty feet above the deck on a thin and jerking rope. The boy is frightened beyond belief, but Larsen will allow no one to go up and help him down. But one of the most powerful examples of his brutal nature can be found in what he does to a shark instead of killing him outright:

The shark, a sixteen-footer, was hoisted up against the main-rigging. Its jaws were pried apart to their greatest extension, and a stout stake, sharpened at both ends, was so inserted that when the pries were removed the spread jaws were fixed upon it. This accomplished, the hook was cut. The shark dropped back into the sea, helpless, yet with its full strength, doomed to lingering starvation--a living death less meet for it than for the man who devised the punishment. (p. 158)

Yet another time Larsen decides to punish two men who escaped from his ship in a small boat. He directs the ship to set out in search of the men, and the ship finds them in the midst of an oncoming gale. The two men know they have no chance to survive as their small boat will be swamped in the sea; so they are ready to be taken aboard the "Ghost" again. But

Larsen has other plans; he lets them work with all their strength to get their small boat near the ship, and then he moves the ship out of their reach again. He continues playing cat and mouse with them until they disappear under a sea of turbulence. Even the members of Larsen's crew seem shocked at what has occurred.

The reason for Wolf Larsen's brutality can most probably be linked with his heredity, as well as his materialism. London points out that it is the primitive being within Larsen that is cruel, for Van Weyden sees him as the "perfect type of the primitive man, born a thousand years or generations too late and an anachronism in this culminating century of civilization" (p. 57).

This reason is emphasized once more in the novel when Van Weyden examines Larsen's face. He can see no remorse for things he has done there:

And again, with never-failing wonder, I remarked the total lack of viciousness, or wickedness, or sinfulness, in his face. It was the face, I am convinced, of a man who did no wrong. And by this I do not wish to be misunderstood. What I mean is that it was the face of a man who either did nothing contrary to the dictates of his conscience, or who had no conscience. I am inclined to the latter way of accounting for it. He was a magnificent atavism, a man so purely primitive that he was of the type that came into the world before the development of the moral nature. He was not immoral, but merely unmoral. (p. 74)

Perhaps one can then agree with Charles Walcutt that,

The product of all this exposition is an absorbing character. Reciting a bit of poetry one moment, kicking a sailor in the stomach the next--exulting in the struggle of life yet condemning ideals as trash and religion as

folly, Wolf holds the reader's attention during the long opening section in which there is no particular action except passages of brutality . . . .<sup>1</sup>

Thus, from this study of The Sea Wolf, one can believe that this novel is an example of naturalism, emphasizing the theme of the superman. London, an individualistic man himself, seems to have always admired strength and daring. Yet he seems to have realized that the idea of the materialistic man was not a realistic one, for he later claimed that this novel attacked individualism rather than celebrated it:

I have again and again written books that failed to get across. Long years ago, at the very beginning of my writing career, I attacked Nietzsche and his super-man idea. This was in The Sea Wolf. Lots of people read The Sea Wolf, no one discovered that it was an attack upon the super-man philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

Somehow his real meaning does not show up in the novel, possibly because Larsen gets the reader's attention and his sympathy. It is strange that one can feel sympathy for this brutal man, but perhaps it is because, as Van Weyden notes, Larsen has a potential for greatness. Van Weyden, at one point in the story, asks Larsen,

Why is it that you have not done great things in this world? With the power that is yours you might have risen to any height. Unpossessed of conscience or moral instinct, you might have mastered the world, broken it to your hand. . . . Why, with all that wonderful strength,

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<sup>1</sup>American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1956), p. 109.

<sup>2</sup>Letters From Jack London, King Hendricks and Irving Shepard, editors (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1965), p. 463.

have you not done something? There was nothing to stop you, nothing that could stop you. (p. 75)

But our sympathy goes to Larsen when he replies that the great opportunity never came. At times he seems to regret his outlook on life, but he says it is too late for him to change. So he continues to be the epitome of the brutal man, but he is not always to be the strongest "pig." He develops a brain tumor, and in this way London depicts the downfall of the superman.

Perhaps we can then say that The Sea Wolf has two heroes. The first half of the book is Larsen's story, but increasingly it becomes the narrator's as well. Wolf Larsen is portrayed as a protagonist in a natural universe, and Humphrey Van Weyden is portrayed as the antagonist in a natural universe. And thus, "two contrasting hero-types emerge: Larsen, accepting the naturalist universe, fighting only to be its master; and Hump, rejecting that universe, retaining his idealism and learning to fight against what he has rejected."<sup>1</sup>

So then, as a naturalistic novel, what is the value of Jack London's The Sea Wolf? Many critics feel that the first part of the book, dealing with the trip toward the sealing grounds, is of special value, but they feel that the second half is weaker, possibly resulting from London's characterization of the woman, Maud Brewster. As one critic

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<sup>1</sup>Jay Gurian, "The Romantic Necessity in Literary Naturalism: Jack London," American Literature, XXXVIII (1966), 114.

put it,

In everything pertaining to the woman and the love between her and Humphrey Van Weyden, The Sea Wolf shows the worst of the rococo nineteenth century; on all other counts it is a forerunner of the best in twentieth-century literature.<sup>1</sup>

A later critic has written that, with The Sea Wolf,

It has become apparent that the message London wished to convey to his readers was that in a society ruled by the principle of universal love, the natural impulses of the human animal could be expressed with neither hypocrisy nor brutality, and that socialism was a gateway to such a society.<sup>2</sup>

Whether or not critics agree that London celebrated individualism or socialism, most seem to agree that this novel is important in the history of American literature, for

It marked another milestone in American literature, not only because of its realism and vigor, the wealth of characters and situations unknown to American literature, but also because it heightened the intellectual tone of the modern novel. Where before had Americans encountered such dread suspense, such authentic death-appeal as found in the conflict of the spiritual versus the materialistic as took place on board the "Ghost" between Wolf Larsen and Humphrey Van Weyden? Where before had they been presented with mature philosophy, had they found it made exciting . . . .<sup>3</sup>

Having read some of Joseph Conrad's works, I can see a parallel between his The Secret Sharer and Heart of Darkness and Jack London's The Sea Wolf. London admired Conrad greatly,

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<sup>1</sup>Stone, p. 192.

<sup>2</sup>Gordon Mills, "Jack London's Quest for Salvation," American Quarterly, VII (Spring 1955), 14.

<sup>3</sup>Stone, p. 191.

as he related in a letter to him:

I had just begun to write when I read your first early work. I have merely appreciated you and communicated my appreciation to my friends through all these years. I never wrote you. I never dreamed to write you.<sup>1</sup>

As London did admire Conrad's work, it seems possible that he could have borrowed some ideas from him. In The Secret Sharer, Conrad presents a young captain and a ghost who is his double. No one else can ever see this man; so he seems to be a second self to the young captain. In The Sea Wolf, Wolf Larsen seems to have a second self, too. It is incongruous that he be a brutal, primitive man and an educated, civilized man at the same time. And it is interesting to note that Larsen can be compared with Kurtz, a character in Conrad's Heart of Darkness. Both men are materialistic, going to any lengths to get money, and I think both men recognize the "horror" of their materialism.

Thus it is that Jack London included elements of naturalism in what is called by many critics his greatest novel, The Sea Wolf. He portrayed the natural man in a struggle for survival in a deterministic and materialistic world, and this natural man, Wolf Larsen, is a character hard to forget.

Jack London's fame then derives from his use of literary naturalism. He drew upon his own experiences in

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<sup>1</sup>Letters From Jack London, p. 442.

life to provide material for his stories, as did most naturalistic writers. He was concerned with presenting the reality of life and so he portrayed life as a struggle for survival in which only the strong can survive. This attitude toward life was revealed most clearly in The Call of the Wild, where London had Buck fighting against men, bitter cold, ravaging hunger, and wolves, and in "Love of Life," where the main character was crippled, deserted by his partner, starving, and freezing to death. London emphasized the naturalistic theme of determinism in his works, sometimes describing an individual as a product of his environment. Thus he placed emphasis on the way Buck was changed from a civilized dog of the Southland into an animal of the wild by his environment in The Call of the Wild, and he emphasized how environment changed Humphrey Van Weyden in The Sea Wolf from a soft-palmed writer into a hard-fisted crew member on the ship. So also, London emphasized biological determinism in his works, especially in The Sea Wolf in his development of the character of the cook, Mugridge, and of the captain, Larsen. Whereas most naturalists seem to have emphasized either a biological or a socioeconomic determinism in their works, London combined the two aspects in The Call of the Wild. Thus, he revealed how the Klondike changed Buck, but he also emphasized that the strength, intelligence, and instincts Buck inherited from his parents and ancestors helped speed

the process of his reversion to the wild.

London emphasized setting in his novels, as did other naturalists, to add strength and reality to the plots. He chose to place his characters in a natural environment, either the frozen Klondike or the sea, battling against it in most of his stories. His ideas for characterization were similar to those of other naturalists, too, for he chose to portray either the very weak or the very strong. His portrayal of the strong character led inevitably to the idea of the superman. Thus, London characterized a superman in the persons of Wolf Larsen in The Sea Wolf and Axel Gunderson in "An Odyssey of the North," as well as in the dog, Buck, in The Call of the Wild. All of these characters had no morals; each felt himself to be above ethics. It is interesting to note, however, that London made it clear that only the dog could survive.

London revealed a fidelity to detail in his stories, too, in his attempt to portray realism. This can be seen most clearly in "To Build a Fire," where London described each step in the process of the building of the fire, and in The Sea Wolf, where he gave a detailed account of the rigging of the masts. Like most naturalists, London revealed a deep interest in nature, describing the beauty of the Klondike and the sea, and then emphasizing their strength. In "The Pearls of Parlay," he described the effects of a hurricane, emphasizing the fierceness of the sea, and in "An Odyssey of the North,"

he emphasized the cruelty of the Klondike environment by describing the ruin of a man's face.

So, with his careful descriptions of every day occurrences on the sea and in the Klondike, with his use of the naturalistic themes of determinism, the struggle for survival, and the superman, with his use of conflict as the basis for plots, and with his emphasis on setting and environment, Jack London provided future generations with an interesting picture of early naturalism in American literature.

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