

ANALYSIS

Martin Eden (1909)



Jack London

(1876-1916)

“Critics have complained about the swift education one of my characters, Martin Eden, achieved. In three years, from a sailor with a common-school education, I made a successful writer of him. The critics say this is impossible. Yet I was Martin Eden.”

Jack London
John Barleycorn (1913)

“Like the author, the hero is a sailor and laborer whose endurance and intellectual curiosity lead him to educate himself so that he may share what he conceives to be the fine, high-thinking life of the wealthy bourgeoisie. He is inspired by Ruth Morse, a college-trained society girl, to him a symbol of what he considers are the values of her class. He becomes a writer, expressing the view of life to which his reading of Spencer has guided him, but only Russ Brissenden, a socialist poet (said to be based on George Sterling), understands the power and beauty of his work.

His fiancée Ruth, like her family and class, ‘worshipping at the shrine of the established’ and financially successful, deserts him, believing him a failure when magazines will not buy his writing, and is outraged by the notoriety attaching to a newspaper’s false accusation that he is a socialist. When one of his books makes him wealthy and famous, she attempts to resume their engagement, but his love is killed by recognition that she really admires only his acclaim and financial success. This realization, the suicide of Brissenden, the loss of affiliation with his own class, and the contempt for the values of the class to which he has climbed rob him of zest for living. He makes a voyage to the South Seas, and, his will to live destroyed, jumps from the ship and drowns.”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

“Like the hero of his autobiographical novel *Martin Eden* (1909), he identified the upper class and the university with all that was noble, and he diverted his burning zeal into a program of reading and writing which covered high-school studies and a term at the University of California in two years; then dropped it all and was off to the Klondike.... His hero Martin brushed success from him and sought morbid peace by drowning.... Those years saw his best work but none is so revealing nor so powerful as *Martin Eden*. The chronicle of a sick ego, this thinly screened confession, with its fidelity, its misunderstanding of naked tragic forces, and its failure of resolution, is the central document of his career. Martin’s defeat was the tragedy of his times because in him the emotional and intellectual conflicts of the new science were brought to a focus.”

Robert E. Spiller
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1034-35

“It is true that he claimed to have written *Martin Eden* to show that life is not worth living without Socialist sanctions, but he himself admitted that nobody had ever got this idea from the book itself... He was more storyteller than novelist, and he is rarely satisfying in his structure. In *Martin Eden* the hero’s struggle for education and self-expression is quite convincing, but his success-story turns to caricature. London nearly always fails in developing his characters....

Both *Martin Eden* and *John Barleycorn* attest that there were no limits to his courage and his sincerity in facing the truth. But the knowledge that was given him was not a saving knowledge. Any time during his earlier life, he might, it would seem, have turned his back upon the way he was traveling. He might even have stopped drinking. He chose not to do so, and he made his choice in the clear knowledge of what it entailed. Like Isadora Duncan, like Oscar Wilde, he threw away his extraordinary charm and squandered much of his genius. It does not matter very much whether his death was suicidal or not. His life was. If morphine had not killed him, uremic poisoning would soon have done the job.”

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952) 225, 227-29

“This autobiographical novel told sensationally of London’s contact with the ‘upper classes,’ his sudden success, his experiences with women, his disgust with society. It also prophesied, in the fate of Martin, London’s own suicide. It was supplemented by the more strictly factual *John Barleycorn* (1913), an account of the power of alcohol over London.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

“*Martin Eden* is not only one of Jack London’s best books; it is also one of his most puzzling ones. It was published in 1909, when London was thirty-three years old and had phenomenally won a world audience with such novels as *The Call of the Wild*, *The Sea Wolf*, and *The Iron Heel*, and it appeared at what was to prove to be the very peak of his career. The curious thing is that *Martin Eden* tells the exciting story of how a writer made good, overcoming in a spirited way all sorts of odds, but it also tells of how that writer, having reached heights beyond his fondest hopes, kills himself in despair. Therein lies the puzzle that has baffled readers and critics ever since the book appeared....

Jack London, like Martin Eden, set out to become an author as though he were beginning a game, or, to suggest a better figure, were taking part in a battle. Each rejection slip was another challenge, and the manuscripts continued on their rounds, provided that there were enough pennies left to buy stamps. Finally, according to legend, the pile of Jack’s rejection slips, impaled on a spindle, became five feet high--and then came a flood of acceptances. In the meantime, Martin Eden, like Jack London, tried his hand at every type of writing... Martin Eden had willed to succeed, just as London had, and succeed he did....

Martin Eden and Russ Brissenden talked for hours in Martin’s squalid room... On two subjects Martin and Brissenden had differed deeply. One was socialism, for Brissenden considered this creed the only hope for the future and felt that Martin’s Nietzschean faith in the superman would soon play him false. Also,

Brissenden did not approve of Martin's great love, Ruth Morse, whom he called 'that pale, shriveled female thing!'.... 'What under heaven do you want with a daughter of the bourgeoisie?....' Jack London had conceived of his novel as a portrait of a member of the proletariat who was attracted to the life of the bourgeoisie, only to find that most of the values of the middle-class were false. At first Martin is all eagerness. He soon learns to cope with forks, to walk on the curbside of the sidewalk when he squires his lady, and even to wear a stiff collar and a well-pressed suit....

Part of the appeal in this strain of the book lies in London's skill in capturing the awkwardness felt by many adolescents in the face of an adult society. Even more of it lies in London's use of his own experiences in pulling himself up from a loveless, poverty-stricken home life to a world which glittered as surely as it does for the characters in Scott Fitzgerald's novels. But there is more passion in *Martin Eden*—more comprehension of the outsider who craves to join the party—than in any of Fitzgerald's novels. This is because Jack London had really been a hungry child....

The last quarter of the novel which was to be titled 'Success' is quite changed in tone from the first three-quarters, which dealt with a fighting adventure. Brissenden's death crystallizes in Martin an awareness of the false values of literary adulation. Ruth Morse breaks their engagement, and he sees her at last in her true light. And then, quite without reason, Martin sells all his manuscripts and becomes a sensational success overnight. All the people who have snubbed him earlier now crave his attention and receive his contempt. Why had they not helped him when he needed helping, he cries out? Even Ruth comes to him and offers to be his mistress if he will only forgive her for breaking their engagement. But there is no love of life left in Martin; his enthusiasms are all burned out. He no longer enjoys living.... Finally he leaves on the steamship *Mariposa* for the South Seas, which seem to beckon him. He never gets there, however. One night, far from land, Martin Eden climbs through the porthole, and, by one final act of will, swims downward until he drowns....

Many readers of *Martin Eden* have felt that suicide was not by any means the logical conclusion of a story dealing with the hero's success against odds. The unexpected nature of the denouement was fully indicated by the fact that the *Pacific Monthly*, when it began serial publication of the story in 1908, offered \$500 to the reader who would most accurately guess the ultimate fate of Martin Eden. Even Jack London, who wrote the book while cruising on his ketch, 'The Snark,' in the South Seas, seemed uncertain as to how he would complete his story until he actually neared its end.... The reason that London gave for that suicide, when a controversy arose, is not very persuasive. Repeatedly he maintained that Martin killed himself because he discovered that his creed of individualism had failed. In a copy of the book given to a friend, he wrote: 'And not one blessed reviewer has discovered that this book is an attack on individualism, that Martin Eden died because he was so utter an individualist that he was unaware of the needs of others, and that, therefore, when his illusions vanished, there was nothing for him for which to live.'

According to London, Martin's mistake was that he did not become a socialist; socialism would have given him a purpose in life. London even offered to debate a minister in his pulpit, planning to convince the congregation that Martin Eden had failed because he did not take up the socialist cause. It is true that, at one point in the novel, Russ Brissenden, who is a socialist largely because he cannot stomach capitalism, tells Martin that socialism would remake his life... 'It will give you a sanction for your existence. It is the one thing that will save you in the time of disappointment that is coming to you.' Yet there is nothing in the book describing Brissenden's socialistic activities, and his desire to help his fellow man does not keep him from putting a bullet into his brain. Nor is Martin even mildly tempted by socialism; rather, he stoutly defends his Nietzschean position during the one occasion when he visits a local socialist meeting.

On the other hand, he does not need socialism to be fully aware of the suffering among his poor friends—his washtub sister, his fertile landlady, his desperate mate from the laundry days—and, when his stories begin to sell, he gives his money lavishly to make them happy, clearing mortgages, buying shoes and ranches, and even purchasing a laundry for Joe. Nor does London write as an advocate of socialism. Never in the novel is the reader in doubt of London's admiration for Martin as an individualist. The spirit of the book lies in Martin's success in 'going it alone.' He is the Alger boy in just one more guise, and the fun of the reading lies in seeing him win his battle—a battle with ignorance, poverty, and, above all, The

Establishment, as we would put it today. Never once is the reader concerned with Martin's attitude toward socialism; it plays so small a part in the book that it goes unnoticed.

Doubtless part of the reason that London made so much of Martin's failure to become a socialist is that he himself was still widely known as a prominent socialist, an avowed Marxist who signed most of his letters with a rubber stamp reading 'Yours for the Revolution, Jack London'; who had been first president of the Intercollegiate Socialist Society, lecturing across the country on the inevitable fall of capitalism... Just the year before *Martin Eden* appeared, he had published *The Iron Heel*, a novel which presents in vivid terms the disintegration of capitalism. It is pertinent that it ends before the proletarian utopia is achieved, with society still in the grip of ruthless dictators, men who would be called Fascists and Nazis in another generation. Perhaps London's failure to make a convincing case for socialism as the hope for Martin Eden lay in London's diminishing faith in the socialist revolution. He was not to resign from the party for seven years, but at the time of writing *Martin Eden* he was sailing on 'The Snark,' no longer active in the cause nor for that matter much concerned with its underlying ideas.

His own 'natural' philosophy had always more nearly resembled that of the predatory Wolf Larsen, strong-handed captain of *The Sea Wolf*, than it did that of Ernest Everhard, hopeful leader of the socialists in *The Iron Heel*. Perhaps Joan London, in her biography of her father, comes fairly close to the point when she insists that, in *Martin Eden*, London wrote his obituary. Not only had he lost his active interest in socialism, but he had found success as a writer increasingly hollow. There was something wrong, and he was searching for the answer.

In the light of Jack London's temperament, it is not difficult to understand the suicide of Martin Eden. The foreshadowing of his final act is, in fact, to be found throughout the entire book. Even though London may not have known that it was there. It lies in the very intensity of Martin's battle despite the uncertainty of his goals. The process of succeeding drives him on with exhilaration; he gains intense pleasure in cutting down on his sleep, husbanding every moment, searching for new ideas, savoring the taste of an effective phrase. The battle is everything; the result, nothing. It is not Brissenden's death, nor the breakup with Ruth Morse, nor the discovery that much of cultural life is shallow that does him in. It is, rather, the discovery that he was going nowhere and the deadly realization that he had lost his interest in life. The frenetic activity was followed, dramatically, by an overpowering inertia. He found that he was interested in nothing; that he had difficulty moving from his chair; that neither food, drink, nor companionship would any longer stimulate him. One is tempted to conclude that he had reached the depressive stage of a manic-depressive existence.

His friend Lizzie Connolly, a working girl who would give him anything to bring him back to himself, had it right when she said: 'It ain't your body. It's your head. Something's wrong with your think machine.' And Martin recognized his trouble when he said to Ruth Morse: 'I am sick, very sick. How sick I did not know till now. Something has gone out of me. I have always been unafraid of life. Life has so filled me that I am empty of any desire for anything.'

There is some evidence that, at the time he wrote *Martin Eden*, Jack London was more than usually worried that he would lose his mind. These fits of depression following elation had plagued him frequently during his short life, but now they were growing more intense. How could he, who savored life so much, find all so dull and drab? He was to tell about his problem soon in his *John Barleycorn*, an autobiographical story that vividly portrays the 'long sickness' of alcoholism which came upon him only too frequently. At least once before writing *Martin Eden*, he had attempted suicide as a way out—curiously, by attempting to drown himself in the Carquinez Straits, near San Francisco. Only the timely arrival of a fishing boat had saved him from death. Now, perhaps that urge became almost unbearable as he looked out his porthole on the Mariposa. Death—the 'Noseless One,' as he called him—would finally be welcomed at his ranch in Glen Ellen, when he was just forty years old.

Fifty books remain—the product of his fevered spirit and tremendous energy. Of them, none is better than *Martin Eden*. Like all his books, it is uneven in structure, sometimes clumsy in expression, at times mawkish in tone. Yet it possesses great lasting power, having more vitality today than it did the day it issued from the press. It gives a trustworthy picture of urban life in California at the turn of the century. It

portrays effectively the feelings of an untrained boy coping with the baffling behavior of an adult society. It presents minor and major characters vividly. It says much about the clash in values between the proletariat and the middle class. It anticipates even more of what our own generation is saying about the faults of The Establishment. It tells more than London realized of the joys and depressions of a neurotic temperament, thus sounding remarkably modern in a world accustomed to the trials of the psychologically troubled. And, above everything else, it breathes energy and creates excitement as Martin Eden discovers the world of intellect and wins the battle to express himself.”

Franklin Walker
“Jack London, *Martin Eden*”
The American Novel: From James Fenimore Cooper to William Faulkner
ed. Wallace Stegner
(Basic Books 1965) 133-43

“In his novels, socialism is the health of the state and the cure for the alienated individual. *Martin Eden*, he wrote to Upton Sinclair, ‘was an attack on individualism.’ On the flyleaf of a copy he added in 1910: ‘This is a book that missed fire with a majority of the critics. Written as an indictment of individualism it was accepted as an indictment of socialism.... Had Martin Eden been a socialist he would not have died.’ To Mary Austin he continued in 1915: ‘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 superman philosophy.’ His last literary note before his suicide in 1916 dealt with ‘*Martin Eden* and *Sea Wolf*, attacks on Nietzschean philosophy, which even the Socialists missed the point of.’ *Martin Eden*, the book makes clear, finds his individual success empty; lacking social conviction, and thus alienated, he commits suicide.”

Jay Martin
Harvests of Change: American Literature 1865-1914
(Prentice-Hall 1967) 236

Michael Hollister (2015)