

ANALYSIS

The Sea Wolf (1904)

Jack London

(1876-1916)

“In *The Sea Wolf* (1904) the failure of the amoral superman is illustrated with even more clarity. Wolf Larsen is London’s most fully conceived character. Captain of a sealing schooner, he knows only the primitive law of survival through predatory ruthlessness. He is a wolf in fact as well as in name, with the shrewd intelligence as well as the brute power of the wolf. But he, like London, has grappled with ‘the books’ and become conscious of his motives and deliberate in his actions. His awakening of the dilettante Humphrey Van Weyden provides a magnificent theme for a great novel, and the first half almost realizes the possibilities by showing in a parallel situation what Norris might have done with the opening chapters of *Moran of the Lady Letty*. But the sudden appearance of the ‘mate-woman’ Maud Brewster, afloat in mid-ocean, throws the whole plot off balance and turns a study in Naturalism into a desert island Romance. Larsen’s fall is caused by the accident of blindness rather than by a tragic flaw in his character or philosophy, and the island sequences, with their absurd mixture of Victorian prudery and primitive law, their painful stretching of probability, leave the novel a worse wreck than the vessel the *Ghost* or its master.”

Robert E. Spiller
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1036

“In *The Sea Wolf*, London is obviously thrilled by the superman aspects of the brutal Wolf Larsen, but he chooses to tell the story from the point of view of the aesthetically sensitive Van Weyden, a believer in spiritual values.”

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952) 225-26

“If Jack London had been born in 1946 instead of 1876 he might have been labeled first an underprivileged child and then a juvenile delinquent. He might have become a ‘beatnik.’ And he might never have written a book. Instead, he wrote fifty books in fifteen years of furious creativity, some of them—notably *The Call of the Wild* and *The Sea Wolf*—landmarks in American literature and read around the world.... His place in the history of letters rests on those two books...written in his middle twenties. The story of the great dog, half St. Bernard, half shepherd, forced to break with the code of civilization and return to wolfishness, obviously derives from Jack’s year in the Klondike. As a story it has a beautiful stripped simplicity; and it reads as well today as it did in 1903. *The Sea Wolf* as obviously finds its background in Jack’s teen-age year on a sailing ship, but its philosophy, sometimes confused and often misinterpreted, is the opposite of that of *The Call of the Wild*.”

What Jack London thought his novel had to say he set down in a letter to Mary Austin in the year before his death. ‘I have again and again written books that failed to get across,’ he complained. ‘Long years ago, at the very beginning of my writing career, I attacked Nietzsche and his superman 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... I do not worry about it.... I go ahead content to be admired for my red-blooded brutality and for a number of other nice little things like that which are not true of my work at all.’

Of course he did worry about it. He worried a lot in those later years, about a lot of things. Some critics had understood his repudiation of superman ethics, others had accurately discerned that he had an uncanny power in writing about red-blooded brutes. Apart from some of the characters who were variations of Jack London’s own self, Wolf Larsen is the most memorable character he ever put on paper. And, while many critics have insisted that Maud Brewster, the cultured gentle lady who shifts the course of the story

midstream, lacked flesh-and-blood reality, the fact is indisputable that she is precisely the type of woman toward whom Jack himself, in real life, was repeatedly drawn. Or, at least, the type he thought his inamoratas were. At the time he was writing *The Sea Wolf*, he was sure he had found her in Charmian Kittredge, who was about to become his second wife....

Jack London had learned, on the waterfront and in Alaska, to respect brute strength, despite his intellectual disavowal of superman philosophy. What he wrote sometimes expressed what he felt more powerfully than what he thought, or thought he thought. In his contradictions Jack London was a man of his American times. He was a self-educated frontiersman when the frontier was vanishing. The waterfronts were his frontier; he sought others at sea and in the Klondike, and found little satisfaction in them. Like his contemporary, Theodore Roosevelt, he preached the strenuous life, and also wanted something more. Comparing primitive bestiality with middle-class money values, he could not help half-glorifying it. He called himself a socialist, and signed his letters 'Yours for the Revolution,' but did not really know what he meant by either word, 'socialism' or 'revolution.'... The last decade of his life was anti-climax. He lectured, and hated his middle-class audiences.... He could never settle down and be content. He had despised money and had yearned for it, and made it as few writers ever do, and had never learned how to use it. It is a bit alarming to think how truly he represented the America in which he lived."

Lewis Gannett
Introduction, *The Sea Wolf*
(Bantam 1960) v, xv-xvii

"The ruthless power of Wolf Larsen, captain of the sealing schooner *Ghost*, is challenged when he rescues Humphrey Van Weyden, a literary critic, and Maude Brewster, a lady poet, after the ferry boat in which they were crossing San Francisco Bay had collided with a steamer. Although Wolf cannot accurately be called a Nietzschean superman, he probably evolved from London's interest in Nietzsche. The story breaks into two parts, the first taking place on shipboard, the second on a desert island where Humphrey, Wolf, and Miss Brewster are wrecked. Years after its publication London stated that he wrote *The Sea Wolf* to show that a superman could not survive in modern society. The novel is still well thought of in Europe, although in this country it is now generally regarded as a 'boys' book'."

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

Michael Hollister (2015)