

20 CRITICS DISCUSS

Jack London

(1876-1916)

“If this youthful California writer makes a study of literary style, it is not apparent, so simply and unaffectedly does he relate a story. There is, indeed, small showing of that painstaking polish so dear to the academic mind; this young man of twenty-four has something more virile to offer than finish. Crude as is his diction, he has learned the ways out of prescribed literature into a spontaneity and freedom that charm and invigorate. One sees no straining after effect, no circumlocution; he reaches the humanity of his readers by direct course.”

Ninetta Eames
Overland Monthly Outlook
(May 1900) 424

“Whether human or canine, the heroes of Jack London’s purely literary works are, to use one of his favourite phrases, ‘rampant individualists’....Whence comes it, then, that the author of such forceful and even ferocious types should be himself an advocate of socialism? In part, no doubt, the explanation may be found in the fact that a vigorous, opposition-loving person can most easily get all of the latter he wants by taking up the championship of some radical social doctrine.”

Robert C. Brooks
Bookman
(September 1905) 61-2

“Form or subject that he happens to choose to write in or about matters little. It is the same vivid, virile personality pouring itself out in a wealth of words that mean warmth and strength or pitiless cold and pitiless cruelty—extreme in either case; exaggerated, but alive, always alive. This is Jack London, and it is of very little importance whether he is writing a story about a man or a dog, about a wolf or a whaler; whether he gives us a sociological treatise on the city slums or a love story in letters. We enjoy it all because it is Jack London, not because it is whatever it happens to be in outer form.”

Grace Isabel Colbron
Bookman
(February 1907) 599-600

“With enormous labors he made himself into a popular writer, discovered that the politer world which he consequently entered was not all he had imagined it, and cast in his fortunes with the working class.... As a propagandist for socialism he wrote *War of the Classes* (1905), *Revolution* (1910), and *The Iron Heel* (1908), a romance recounting an imaginary revolution of 1932....His popularity and his eagerness for money tempted him to write much, especially in the way of short stories, that was below his better level, and he never rose above his first marked success, *The Call of the Wild* (1903). Although he dealt often with ideas in his books, and liked to hint at his learning, he wrote as a rule under the obsession of physical energy. What was elemental in Frank Norris became abysmal in Jack London. He carried the cult of red blood in literature to an extreme at which it began to sink to the ridiculous, as in his lineal descendants of the moving-pictures.

His heroes, whether wolves or dogs or prizefighters or sailors or adventurers-at-large, have all of them approximately the same instincts and the same careers. They rise to eminence by battle, hold the eminence for awhile by the same methods, and eventually go down under the rush of stronger enemies. London, with the strength of the strong, exulted in the struggle for survival. He saw human history in terms of the evolutionary dogma, which to him seemed a glorious, continuous epic of which his stories were episodes. He set them in localities where the struggle could be most obvious: in the wilds of Alaska, on remote Pacific Islands, on ships at sea out of hearing of the police, in industrial communities during strikes, in the underworlds of various cities, on the routes of vagabondage. As he had a boy’s glee in conflict, so he had a boy’s insensibility to physical suffering. *The Sea Wolf* (1904) represents his appetite for cold ferocity in its

record of the words and deeds of a Nietzschean, Herculean, Satanic ship captain whose incredible strength terminates credibly in sudden paralysis and impotence.”

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1921-68) 237-38

“Ordinarily one takes a febrile over-excitement and love of excessive violence to be signs of weakness; but in Jack London they were not—he really did have strength. So likewise in his writing: his fury of language and intemperance of emotion have led some critics to deny that he possesses genuine vigor and power. But to do so is surely an error; those who are not too offended by his excesses can hardly fail to feel his force. Only, in his books as in his own life and character, the strength he had is turned, as if he could realize it only in fighting, coercion, and destruction, not to creation, but to violence.”

T. K. Whipple
Saturday Review
(24 September 1938) 4

“Jack London had been one of the three young pioneers who at the turn of the century had blazed the literary trails into modern American literature. Although a few predecessors had shown the way, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Jack London had vigorously insisted upon introducing themes, characters, and styles of writing previously unheard of in American literature, but already large and vital in American life. All three died young, but Jack London lived longer in the twentieth century. All were timely, catching unerringly the drumbeats of the new day, which was to develop swiftly into a day of struggle, but Jack London was a Socialist, and with conscious social perspective he had inquired into history for pattern or lack of pattern. Before he fell victim to the competitive spirit and commercialism of the times, he had described more boldly and with more fundamental insight than Frank Norris the real protagonists in that struggle and its causes and had foreseen its end.”

Joan London (daughter)
Jack London and His Times
(Doubleday 1939) 377

“He needed action to live up to his reputation of being a man of action. But there was something more. Even when he wrote stories of action so well that the whole world wondered, it wasn’t enough. The internal drive to the unattainable was superhuman. His tragedy lay in that. It was the tragedy of frustration. It was always what he had to fight people for that gave him satisfaction. In the end, as in the beginning, he was always hungry for something not on the bill of fare. Not once in his forty-one years did Jack look on life with quiet eyes, nor did he ever know the meaning of quiet happiness.”

Joseph Noel
Footloose in Arcadia
(Lippincott 1940) 270

“His popularity, journalistic training, and eagerness for money caused him to write too prolifically, but his energy and ability as a storyteller gave even his worst writing a great appeal....His longer fiction also showed a deep concern with physical energy, the cult of ‘red blood,’ and a breed of Nietzschean supermen engaged in violent struggles of various sorts. This includes many novels, the best known of which are *The Call of the Wild* (1903), the story of a dog in the Far North, who escapes civilization to lead a wolf pack; *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), about the powerful, ruthless captain of a sealing ship; *The Game* (1905), the story of a prizefighter; *Before Adam* (1906), concerned with the life of prehistoric savages; *White Fang* (1906) telling of a wild dog who is tamed; *Martin Eden* (1909), a semi-autobiographical novel about a writer’s struggles; *Burning Daylight* (1910), the story of Daylight, a man of tremendous energy who wrests a fortune from the Klondike, then idealistically renounces his hard-won wealth; *Smoke Bellew* (1912), about a journalist’s strenuous adventures in the Yukon; *John Barleycorn* (1913), an autobiographical memoir intended as propaganda for temperance; and *Jerry of the Islands* (1917), the story of an Irish setter pup in the South Seas....

In spite of his belief in collectivism as an inevitable next step in human evolution, London was most convincing in his depiction of individualistic struggle and primitive violence. The very titles of many of his

books, e.g. *The Strength of the Strong* (1911) and *The Abysmal Brute* (1913), indicate his preoccupation with the concept of the brute which underlies the social behavior of men and animals. Buck, in *The Call of the Wild*, shows a retrogression, while *White Fang* and *Jerry of the Islands* depict the brute under control or in process of subjugation. Wolf Larson is a combination of civilized brain with primitive force. In *The Iron Heel*, one of the most impressive scenes shows the people of the abyss fighting with bestial, reckless fury against their oppressors. London worshipped Marx and Nietzsche impartially, grasping what he could of their diametrically opposed theories, and championing now one, now the other, both in his novels and in his own life.”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-63)

“Many of the abortive pseudoscientific trends in Frank Norris found their popular apologist in Jack London...who published his first book two years before Norris died....The illegitimate son of an itinerant astrologer and of a spiritualist, London preached the more obvious radicalism of his day in romantic fiction that, during sixteen years (1900-1916), raised him from obscurity and poverty to fame and wealth, brought him all the rewards of adventure, love, learning, and worldly possessions that his insatiable body and mind craved, and led him to egocentric despair and probable suicide. The personification of the romantic impulses of the new century, vigorous, naïve, and prolific, he provided his magazine readers with unstinted fare, and left a small body of writing which, for sincerity and vitality, deserves to be rescued from the oblivion to which his artistic faults threaten to condemn it. Primarily a skillful teller of tales, he achieved originality and significance by enthusiastic acceptance of the new doctrines of society and science that made a ferment of the popular mind....

Jack London was a confessed Spencerian evolutionist and Marxian socialist. He had familiarized himself with evolution and socialism by undisciplined and voracious reading, and by constant talks with men more learned than he was or ever cared to be, but he knew both movements as the ultimate consumer, the people, rather than as the scholar or critic. From Spencer and his popularizers he accepted the thesis that man evolved from lower forms of life, differing from them in degree rather than in kind, and he followed the doctrine of the ‘synthetic philosophy’ through to a positive faith in progress and a benevolent anarchy of Anglo-Saxon supremacy that would allow both social harmony and complete individualism.

His mind rejected the Nietzschean doctrine of the superman, but his temperament accepted it with a deeper logic. From the *Communist Manifesto*, which he had read while on the road, and from the writings of American socialists rather than from *Das Kapital*, he drew the doctrines of class warfare, revolution, and the ultimate triumph of the working class over the capitalists. He resented the socialists’ demand for political action as a threat to individual prerogative, but he fell in with their program and became an active worker in their cause. Such inconsistencies were enough to tear him apart, but the real source of his sickness, an intense and inhibited egocentricity, he revealed with complete candor and total incomprehension. These three issues, biological evolution, socialism, and psychological inhibition, became one in Martin Eden’s attempt to win fame, fortune, and love by determination...

In the title essay of *The Human Drift* [1917] London comes to grips with his problem and realizes that social revolution is only an incident in the process of evolution. Returning to Spencer with the intellectual comprehension of a Garland and the emotional acceptance of a Norris, he declares that ‘man, the latest of the ephemera, is pitifully a creature of temperature, strutting his brief day on the thermometer.’...All the red-blooded eagerness and purity of the open life, which had been honestly his own at the start but which had by now become merely his marketable product, had faded into a cynical negation....He had come finally, in spite of his buoyant temperament, to the pessimistic conclusions of the philosophy of biological and mechanistic determinism. It remained for Henry Adams to define and for later naturalists like Dreiser...Farrell, and Steinbeck to grapple more significantly with the problems which he, Norris, and others had raised.”

Robert E. Spiller
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1033-35,1037

“He remains one of America’s most significant writers because he concerned himself with the vital problems of his age. Of working class origin, he was the first American writer to portray his class sympathetically and one of the few to use literature for building the foundations of a future society. He was not educated in the formal sense, but his comprehension was so great that he rose above educated men in ability and power to portray in his writings the fundamental issues of our times. The spirit of the common people of America, heroic, fiery, and adventurous will live forever in the pages of his rebel stories, novels, and essays.”

Philip S. Foner
Jack London, American Rebel
(Citadel 1947) 130

“In the literature of protest in America from John Woolman to Richard Wright, the writings of Jack London must occupy a place very near the top. To London the brotherhood of man was no mere exercise in economic adjustment but a passionate gospel and he preached it with an intensity and dialectical skill that made his books virtual manuals among Socialist readers of his day. Although the number of his readers has diminished from the time he was known as the ‘Kipling of Alaska,’ the vigor and energy of his narrative, and his tender and exact portraits of the poor in his autobiographical writings are insurance that these readers will never entirely disappear.”

Thomas Lask
New York Times
(18 January 1948) 24

“I think part of the reason for London’s popularity in Europe is that he is a very intense writer at his best, and the great elan and vigor that are properly associated with this country and its people emerge often from his pages. To a Europe drained dry of such faculties, it is understandable that London’s people, their concerns and their virtues, should have a nostalgic appeal, that Europeans might even read of them as other more credulous generations read of such heroic figures as Roland and Hector.”

Harry Sylvester
New York Times
(19 August 1951) 18

“Not only mere awareness of contemporary or historical issues, but industrious and diligent research into the facts, collation of facts observed, a journalistic zeal in accounting for mass of detail: these were the order of the day. Dreiser, Norris, Crane, and London had all served their time as reporters; the reportorial experience either was the sole formal training or loomed much larger than any other in the discipline of the novelist....In the case of Jack London, there is a superman type, the Wolf Larsen of American fiction, who moves in and out of boys’ adventure stories, where he properly belongs. The most strenuous examples of these naturalistic heroics are to be found in the anticlimactic to-the-death struggle between McTeague and Marcus Schouler in *McTeague*, several scenes in *Moran of the Lady Letty*, and much of London’s *The Sea-Wolf* (1904).

All of this is an interesting sideshow in the naturalist carnival, except that in the cases of both London and Norris it argued over and over against the interest of other naturalists in a kind of proletarian induction. It disappeared from serious literature, to be revived later in another form of the novel of violence, the novel (ranging from the detective thriller to the farcical tragedies of Caldwell) in which violence becomes an externalized demonstration of contemporary economic and moral dislocation....Cowperwood [in Dreiser] is an expression of natural forces in America’s industrial world, as London’s Wolf Larsen is in the purely physical world.”

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Modern Novel in America
(Regnery/Gateway 1951, 1956, 1963) 35-36, 44, 50

“Jack London always insisted that his books were not mere adventure stories; they had a meaning. Theoretically, he was a materialist. Socialist, Darwinian, Nietzschean—all in one; and many of his admirers have trustingly envisioned him as perched upon the backs of all these horses, even when they

were galloping furiously in different directions. Temperamentally, he was closest to Nietzsche, as his supermen and superdogs attest....

He was a hack writer of genius, and, as has been said of Byron, the faults of his work were the faults of his life. In his essay on Jack London, Van Wyck Brooks quotes Lowes Dickinson's saying that 'The Red-blood is happiest if he dies in the prime of life; otherwise he may easily end with suicide.' For civilized men there is nothing else quite so artificial as primitivism, and the vitality cult may well be a sign of deficient vitality."

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952) 224

"A subhuman world of instinctual emotion and, in its purest expression, of complete animal identification was the one in which he moved so easily and so instinctively himself. And the dominant mood was of primitive fear or, at its best, of brief and still terror-haunted and transient pleasure amidst all the horrors of the jungle."

Maxwell Geismar
Rebels and Ancestors
(Houghton 1953) 185

"London's instinct was to feel life as chaos and battle and to exult in the strength which produced both, but his intelligence, which was not of the most acute, tried to rationalize instinct, to fit jagged pieces into a design, and so he found laws operating in the vast spaces of the far North: the law of natural selection, the law of Eskimo and Indian whereby iron sank in water and women obeyed men, and the law of the white man, enforced by stalwart Mounted Police. Since London's eye was not single, since he could not decide whether he was a disciple of Nietzsche or of Marx, he compromised a narrative gift originally distinguished by vigor, freshness, and dramatic proficiency, and eventually wrote some of the poorest novels of the day."

Grant C. Knight
The Strenuous Age in American Literature
(North Carolina 1954) 222-23

"The mark of illegitimacy seems to have disturbed London deeply and to have motivated his later struggle for fame, fortune, and social standing....London discovered Darwin and Marx, assimilated them eagerly, became a Socialist, went on to the reading of Nietzsche, and was captivated even more by the idea of a superman than by the impending overthrow of capitalism. The result was a prolonged attack of mental indigestion from which London never altogether recovered. But in the meantime he had been writing his stories and novels, had found a large public, and made himself wealthy....

London's first novel, *A Daughter of the Snows* (1902), stresses his belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority, seen often in his later books. His most enduring and popular book is *The Call of the Wild* (1903), in which the great dog Buck rejoins the wolves from which his ancestors sprung; directly opposite is *White Fang* (1906), the story of a wild dog brought to civilization. *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), a story of a would-be superman, unquestionably reflects his own views and experiences....*The Iron Heel* (1907) is a prophecy of a revolution from 1912 to 1918. *Martin Eden* (1909) is frankly, and rather uncannily, autobiographical; the hero commits suicide, just as London ultimately did."

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

"Perhaps the most gifted prose talent of this generation, certainly the most prodigally squandered, belonged to Jack London (1876-1916). In the decade and a half of his headlong career he wrote fifty books; went the course of several different 'philosophies' (Darwin, Herbert Spencer, Nietzsche, socialism, racism, nihilism); became one of the first victims, self-appointed, of the ruthless system of modern democratic publicity; and died correspondingly (a suicide, in ambiguous circumstances), a sacrifice to an exorbitant personal legend. A best seller from the time of two early naturalist thrillers, *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and

The Sea Wolf (1904), he is a striking example of the popular writer who establishes his relation with a mass audience as much by seeming to provoke and offend it as by flattering its official tastes. An element of charlatanism hangs about London's work...and it is no small part of his immense success.

He had a shrewd instinct for the chronic main currents of middle-class hallucination, especially a kind of retributive daydreaming about acts of pure domination or unconditional conquest. He appealed most strongly to readers who wanted their daydreams explained a little, dignified by an overglaze of objective theory; readers for whom, around 1910, pseudo-ideas like the Yellow Peril, the natural supremacy of the strong, the Kiplingesque code of the pack, were the stuff of common wisdom. Darker, more complex intuitions, as of the spreading panic and emptiness of modern life, also inform his work, and these, too, it may be said, obscurely confirmed his appeal. Fifty years after his death it is uniquely Jack London among the popular authors of his day who still holds his place—though we note that he does so as, first, a writer for boys and, second, a master of 'socialist realism,' the American author...widely circulated in the Soviet Union....

He considered himself a novelist of ideas and regularly padded his adventure narratives with intimations of arcane philosophic truth. The actual quality of his thinking, however, is fairly represented by this statement, in the autobiographical *Martin Eden* (1909), of how all experience can be explained by 'biology': 'I mean the real interpretive biology, from the ground up, from the laboratory and the test-tube and the vitalized inorganic right on up to the widest aesthetic and sociological generalizations.' This is the thought—and style—not merely of the self-taught but of the invincibly self-satisfied....London's emphatic, no-nonsense colloquialism...has survived and prospered as the basic idiom of the straight-talking mass-market fantasy-realists of the 1950s and 1960s...

Jack London's stock in trade as a novelist was the doubly perishable one of a wholly calculated and manufactured sensationalism. In his handling the naturalist novel stands revealed as one more renewal of the durable genre of the Gothic, which since the late eighteenth century has been the most flexible of literary instruments for expressing the range and depth of middle-class disaffection and hysteria. The obvious savoring of physical punishment and torture, brutality and animal terrors, even the crude myth-fantasy of conspiratorial revolution dramatized in *The Iron Heel* (1907), have a long ancestry in popular and Gothic convention. Yet London was more than a popular hack. When he was not straining after sensation and shock, he could write a natural, easy, pungent descriptive style, and he could develop passages of narrative action with a genuine flair for proportion and emphasis. Even during the hectic last years of his life certain straightforward stories of solitary physical adventure achieved an admirable cleanness of form and concentration of emotional effect. The most satisfying books, however, are not his novels. Rather, they are works of personal reporting like *The Road* (1907), a chronicle of tramp life..."

Warner Berthoff

The Ferment of Realism: American Literature, 1884-1919
(Free Press/Macmillan 1965) 244-46

"London wrote in a philosophical tradition rather than a literary one. The books he carried to the Yukon with him were *The Origin of Species*, Haeckel's *Riddle of the Universe*—most precious of all—*Paradise Lost*. During a time when Melville was largely forgotten, London read *Moby-Dick* again and again. He read Franz Boas's pioneering anthropological studies and Frazer's *The Golden Bough*; in biology, Darwin, Huxley, and Wallace; among economists he studied Malthus, Ricardo, and Mill, as well as Kropotkin, George, DeLeon, Benjamin Kidd, Marx, and Engles; among philosophers, Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Hegel, Leibnitz, Spencer, and Nietzsche. The literature of reform, expose, and unionism he consumed voraciously.

London's fiction grows naturally out of this tradition of ideas, and not essentially from his literary tradition or contemporaries. This distinction is, indeed, frequently the point of his novels. Humphrey Van Weyden, at the beginning of *The Sea Wolf* (1904), is said to have published an article on Poe in the *Atlantic*, and is interested only in romantic writers. For the Wolf Larsen to whom he must go to school in order to conquer has read not only Poe and DeQuincy, but also Darwin and Spencer. Like Larsen's mind, London's resounds with ideas. In this and other ways London, who possessed an imagination driven and

vitalized by intellect, resembled D. H. Lawrence. Beginning with material as various as those of the Yukon, the South Seas, the London slums, or the San Francisco waterfront, he made all alike embody the similar excitement of the life of the mind. Halting and careless in mere narration, frequently rhetorical and posturing in dialogue, his style shows, when engaged in the play of mind, the conscious craftsmanship which might have been predicted of the author who, at the age of twenty-three, had published two articles, one on language and the other on the use of verbs, in the *American Journal of Education*. He was able to transform dogmatic ideology into general ideas and ideas into action....

In his fiction ideas are translated into and assessed by their results in action. To the end of his life he retained this intellectual vitality. The decline in his work coincided with the decline of Socialism and Progressivism, when his intellectual tradition lost popular relevance and left his books mere money-makers without an intellectual *raison d'être*. 'I loathe the stuff [fiction]...' he wrote to Upton Sinclair in 1911. '[If] I could have my choice about it I never would put pen to paper—except to write a Socialist essay to tell the bourgeois world how much I despise it.' At his best, in his books London entertained imaginatively the imperatives of life for the individual and for society, and the clashes between them. Unfortunately for his reputation London's work has been misinterpreted. Tracing the permutations of his literary popularity, James Hart, for instance, has contended that London's thousands of readers 'translated his Nietzschean doctrine into terms of their own lives, dreaming of rugged-individualistic successes.' But London's work did not enact Roosevelt's *Strenuous Life* or Nietzsche's *Superman*....

Finding in Spencer's cosmic synthesis justification for his own compulsions, London saw development pointing toward the triumph of group over individual strength; of cooperation over primitive competition. So also, 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.'...Jack London was perhaps the last of the writers whose work was vitalized by the remarkable efflorescence of utopian ideas in the nineteenth century....alternately a utopian and dystopian; blond beast and Socialist—mingling, harmonizing, or confusing Marx, Darwin, Spencer, and Nietzsche; trapped into clichés of racial or national superiority, yet proclaiming himself a comrade to workers everywhere; paralleling the muckraking movement with his analysis of the London slums, *The People of the Abyss* (1902), but with no faith in reform movements... Jack London fittingly concludes the attempt to control the world by controlling ideas, and so to write utopia into existence."

Jay Martin
Harvests of Change: American Literature 1865-1914
(Prentice-Hall 1967) 234-35, 238-39

"Jack London's life and writings illustrate the central contradictions and divisions of American society—the chief of these being the gap between 'high' and 'low' culture. His critical reputation reinforces this observation. He is read by the masses and largely ignored by the academy. His denunciations of the shallow bourgeoisie, his colorful advocacy of socialism, and his two-fisted approach to ideas and art have not endeared him to academic critics. In addition, he poses a difficult problem for feminists, for he used gender to describe and mask class differences. The result is often a volatile mix of trenchant social criticism, assorted chauvinisms, and post-Victorian sentimentality.

Precisely because his artistic failings are so closely associated with the divisions between male and female, lower class and upper class, high and low culture, Jack London's work deserves close attention. Art for him was a way of healing those divisions...Much of his work is flawed, and in part the weak points reflect fissures in his own consciousness. Ideologically drawn to working-class solidarity, yet fearful of identifying himself with what often appeared to him a degraded form of humanity, he experienced the double identity of the reportorial observer he adopts in *The People of the Abyss*. In his Alaskan stories, however, he frequently achieved the distance and sympathy necessary for art. Sharply etched silhouettes of men and dogs moving across the vast waste of land, they evoke the puniness of human life in the face of the imperturbable cosmos. At their best, they struggle to assert...an 'ecological balance' between the forces of life and death."

Joan D. Hedrick
The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2
(D. C. Heath 1990) 725-2

Michael Hollister (2014)