

JACK LONDON'S RELIGION:

AN EXAMINATION OF THE BASIC BELIEFS EVIDENT IN HIS WRITINGS

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Stephen George and I from the Ricks College English Department participated in a panel as part of the conference on “Spiritual Frontiers 2000: Belief and Values in the Literary West” sponsored by the Redd Center for Western Studies and by the Center for the Study of Christian Values in Literature at Brigham Young University. Our panel considered three authors from California—John Steinbeck, Frank Norris and Jack London, who are generally grouped together as naturalists. Naturalism in literature is the application of scientific determinism to writing. Scientific determinism as used by these writers is the idea that men's lives are the result of forces discovered by scientists such as Newton, Darwin, Marx and Freud.

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For much of the first half of the 1900's, Jack London reigned as America's most popular author. At the height of his career he was making more money by far than any other author of his time. He poured his money into building Wolf House on his ranch in Glen Ellen, California (the house burned shortly before the Londons were to move in) and into the building of a sailing yacht, the Snark, for an intended round-the-world trip. Few, if any, of London's beliefs are hidden or subtle. They are expressed openly in his fiction as well as in his non-fictional writing. But he clearly shifts away from his early belief in individual power and self and drink toward a belief in socialism and a recognition of the problems of the rough life and alcohol.

I have divided my consideration of Jack London's beliefs as expressed in his writings under four headings.

PHYSICAL HEALTH AND POWER

In the preface to *The People of the Abyss*, an account of his time with the poor in East London in 1902, London forcefully states his perspective:

Further, I took with me certain simple criteria with which to measure the life of the under-world. That which made for more life, for physical and spiritual health, was good; that which made for less life, which hurt, and dwarfed, and distorted life, was bad.

Jack London had a vigorous joy in life. His was a Walt Whitmanesque pleasure in his own physical being and doing. This worship of the physicality of life manifest itself in all of his life: the early hard years hawking

newspapers on the streets; the experiences in the Alaskan gold fields; his building of the Snark and sailing about the Pacific.

Typical of this pride in his physical prowess in his early years is his bragadocio account of being drunk and falling overboard from a boat. He swam and drifted toward the ocean and what he accepted as certain death. Then as he sobered, he decided he did not wish to die, and so, after four hours in the water, he swam to shore; being saved as he said, “by [his] constitution and physical vigor.”

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London’s admiration of physical prowess may have been a deciding factor in his death. As his physical health faded, he may have chosen death rather than face life on a diminishing level. London died from an apparent overdose of medicine. Ernest Hemingway, who also took great pride in his physical prowess, seems to have made the same decision for the same reasons—shooting himself with his favorite rifle in his Ketchum, Idaho, home.

Many, considering London’s suicide, have noted the interesting irony of the ending to the autobiographically based novel *Martin Eden*: At the end of the novel, Martin has gained fame from his writing but finds it meaningless because of what he has lost. He despairs and commits suicide. London writes:

In the moment of that thought the desperateness of his situation dawned upon him. He saw, clear eyed, that he was in the Valley of the Shadow. All the life that was in him was fading, fainting, making toward death. He realized how much he slept, and how much he desired to sleep. Of old, he had hated sleep. It had robbed him of precious moments of living. Four hours of sleep in the twenty-four had meant being robbed of four hours of life. How he had grudged sleep! Now it was life he grudged. Life was not good; its taste in his mouth was without tang, and bitter. This was his peril. Life that did not yearn toward life was in fair way toward ceasing.

On the boat headed for Tahiti before Martin goes overboard and drowns himself, he reads from Swinburne:

From too much love of living,
From hope and fear set free,
We thank with brief thanksgiving
Whatever gods may be
That no life lives forever;
That dead men rise up never;
That even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea.

NATURAL AND ACQUIRED LEARNING AND WISDOM

In his novels *Martin Eden* and *The Sea-Wolf* London makes clear his admiration for learning. But in *Sea-Wolf* physical prowess certainly holds a solid position. London wrote that “One of my earliest and strongest impressions was of the ignorance of other people.” Most of his stories glorify the endurance of both man and beast. But ignorance more than the lack of physical strength which brings the man’s death in London’s popular story “To Build a Fire.”

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After we had read “To Build a Fire” in my American literature class, I asked my students to write what they thought the beliefs and the moral world were of the author of the story. Most said that his god was nature and that good consisted in learning and conforming to natural law; evil consisted of pride, ignorance and ignoring the laws of nature. Some suggested that the old-timer who laid “down the law that no man must travel alone in the Klondike after fifty below” typifies this nature god. Although the protagonist knows the law, he has ignored it, assuming somehow that he can survive this trek alone at fifty below zero. London emphasizes that this man is not a thinker (in contrast with both Humphrey Van Weyden and Wolf Larsen in *Sea Wolf* who are above all things thinkers).

London respects the natural or innate wisdom of both men and animals. The animals in *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* and in such short stories as “Batard” survive by the brute power of innate wisdom.

In the short story “A Daughter of the Aurora” (a somewhat sexist portrayal of innate feminine wisdom), Joy Molineau demonstrates perceptive knowledge of men. The narrator of the story says, “they [the men] did not know the wisdom of her play, its deepness and deftness.” Harrington and Savoy are the prime contenders in a literal sled dog race for her hand in marriage and a fortune in gold. The wonderfully ironic ending of the race with her manipulation to ensure who wins displays the lovely but somewhat perverse depth of her assessment of the two contenders.

WORK, POVERTY, & SOCIALISM

In his essay “How I became a Socialist” London says that at an early age he believed in self and the gospel of work. “It was sanctification and salvation.” However, as he saw how the poor and weak were treated, his gospel became socialism. He recognized the mistreatment others received. As a young man, London worked as a sailor aboard a seal hunting schooner the “Sophie Sutherland.” There he witnessed the death of an unfit and misfit sailor who dies ignored by all. He was strongly affected by

the “pinch of poverty” in his own life and was led to ask, “if this were the meaning of life—to be a work-beast?” His brand of socialism or at least his expression of it often embarrassed other socialists.

Socialism is London’s only major shift from his devotion to the “natural” order of things.

NATURAL RELIGION

London’s short story “The God of His Fathers” expresses a strong dislike for institutionalized religion. Under threat of death at the hands of attacking natives in the frozen Yukon, the tough woodsman dies for his nature/natural god while the priest/missionary denies his god.

In his story “The Great Interrogation” London shows us a Christianity which seems to smile acceptance as one man takes advantage of his neighbor. The story emphasizes as virtues, keeping commitments (marriage being one) and looks favorably on music, beauty and spirit.

On one occasion London listed the desirables of life as knowing “girl’s love...woman’s love...love of children...the wide joy-fields of art...star-cool heights of philosophy.” His story “Grit of Women” exemplifies endurance and physical prowess. But the crucial virtue of the Indian woman, Passuk, in the story is her unflinching devotion to her white-man husband. In their long trek to seek help for a starving community, they are on short rations. Yet she quietly hordes some of her portion to give to him when they run out. Her devotion to him is deeper still, for as she dies, we learn that it was her brother they had passed on the trail whom she chose not to help. Helping him would have meant taking rations she intended to give to her husband.

London presents us with natural justice meted out without deference to anyone who ignores nature’s laws. One contrast is the story “Which Make Men Remember” in which god’s justice is delivered decisively by Uri Bram on Fortune La Pearle. La Pearle killed the man with whom Uri had forged a lasting bond of brotherhood. They had unitedly killed their horses rather than sell them to a man who would mistreat them. Many of his stories exude a powerful sense of chivalry of the type evident in the old tales of knights.

London defines for us time after time a code of the woods. For example, his short story “Where the Trail Forks” focuses on an inherent right and good. Hitchcock, the white prospector, is willing to give his life to save Sipsu, the Indian maid. She is to be sacrificed by her tribe as propitiation to the gods. Hitchcock, the narrator says, “was born to honor and championship, and to do the thing for the thing’s sake, nor stop to weigh

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or measure.” His companions, who fail to follow this chivalric code of the woods, die at the hands of the Indians.

CONCLUSION

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Jack London had nothing to do with formal religion. He believed in the physical world. From it he learned mostly pragmatic lessons. But from it he also learned certain commendable virtues.

Above all else, Jack London’s writings testify of certain traits of character that bring lasting strength and enhance life: *The Sea-Wolf* presents the tempering quality of the feminine. The novel extols strength and beauty of the physical form. Commensurate with the strong concerns of many people in the latter part of the twentieth century, London early on expressed concern for preservation. London in *The Sea-Wolf* objects to the wanton slaughter of animals (the seals). The hero, Humphrey, learns the value of doing something for a living, and he learns moral courage—a consistency in living by his principles. His sense of moral right has been solidified by his encounter with harsh experience. Most of all he has discovered the emptiness of intellectual knowledge divorced from harsh reality. Evil, Humphrey discovers, is the free play of passions, so conversely, good must be the bridling of passions. Jack London is Humphrey Van Weyden; Jack London is Martin Eden; Jack London is many of his own fictional creations learning life’s lessons. ☺