

Cultural Transformation In *The Sea Wolf* Of Jack London.

Ms. Neetu Sharma¹, Dr. Kusum Vasishth²

¹Ph.D Scholar, Lovely Professional University, Phagwara

²Assistant Professor, Lovely Professional University, Phagwara

Abstract

The life and the works of Jack London depict his struggles to bring a radical transformation of American culture like Sinclair Lewis who satirized the “Main Street mentality” and “Babbitt culture” spreading like a destructive virus in America. Jack London expressed his commitment for the socialist movement to uproot the capitalism of America. He belonged to the grass root level; he had worked in mills, factories and mines and had seen the oppression of the rich people. He got the first emotional shock when his beloved Mabel Applegarth deserted him and he started hating the upper class values. He had innate sympathy for the working class and as a proletarian; he desired to be a part of the Cultural Revolution. London possessed exceptional gifts which could lift him out of his class. But his passion for socialism infused in him a strong enthusiasm to bring drastic change in the contemporary America. His drive for material prosperity put him in dilemma; on one hand he was a committed socialist and on the other hand he desired to be rich to escape the hell of poverty and hunger. Jack London continues struggling in life and continued writings novels to articulate his passion for the cause of socialism and to bring the cultural transformation. London realized that the poor and the proletariats are weaklings and the weak have no place in the cruel oppressive system; they have to organize themselves with to fight with the oppressive forces.

Key Words: Transformation, Destructive, Proletarian, Socialist, Manifest, Manifestation, Oppressive, Proletariats, Socialism.

1. INTRODUCTION

After the World War 1 American emerged as an industrial country as many industries were set up and millions of poor workers migrated from the towns and cities to New York, Chicago, Manhattan and Los Angeles for employment. The capitalists and the business tycoons of America controlled the means of production. They had become greedy as they thrived on the profit motive. Their greed had dehumanized them. His famous allegorical novel *The Sea Wolf* depicts the oppression of the capital society.

Jack London wrote a letter to the Editor of the *Oakland Times* referring to Karl Marx’s *Capital* and it is no wonder that London grew as a socialist writer and thinker. Marx’s influence on Jack London is most apparent in his collection of essays; *The War of the Classes* which stems from the personal experiences of Jack London. *The Communist Manifesto* (1961) of Marx was the main book that changed the mind and sensibility of Jack London. He was excited by the powerful battle cry of Karl Marx (1961):

“The socialists disdain to conceal their ideas and views. They openly declare their ends can be obtained only by a forcible overthrow of all existing conditions. Let the ruling class tremble at the socialistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to gain. Working men of all countries unite” (Marx 44)

London had lived in poverty and his early life was full of struggles; he had to move from place to place in search of employment. In *The War of the Classes*, he wrote:

The community branded me a “red shirt” because I stood for municipal ownership...And far be it from me to deny that socialism is a menace. It’s main purpose is to wipe out, root and branch, all capitalistic institutions of present day society. (Jack London, *War of the Classes* 2)

Jack London struggled in his life time and through his active participation in the socialistic movement in America. Like Marx and Sinclair Lewis London wanted to bring cultural transformation through Marxist Socialism. London had keenly observes the inequalities and injustices in American society and he believed that socialism can cure all the economic ills of the society. Jack London comments thus:”And far be it from me to deny that socialism is a menace. It is its purpose to wipe out, root and branch, all capitalistic institutions of present day society. It is distinctly revolutionary” (Jack London, *War of the Classes* 3). Jack London firmly believed that the only panacea left for the poor people is the adoption of socialism that can transform the life of the poor Americans. His radical beliefs were expressed in all his major novels. Jack London’s *Sea Wolf* (1904) expresses his socialistic vision and the powerful work to bring cultural transformation in America. In the second sentence of the novel, London refers to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche presenting Humphrey Van Weydon who is a writer and a critic. Weyden’s friend Charley Furuseh reads ”to rest his brain” and this allusion suggests that the novel is the tale expressing long sickness of Jack London. Nietzsche attempted to combine two set of values which are not easily harmonized. Jack London created Van Weyden and Woolf Larsen following the idealistic principles of Nietzsche. In one of the stories: *Love of Life*, (1945) he expresses his socialistic mission as a writer.

The main characters in the novel are Henderson, Smoke and Jack Horners who are hunters. The plot of the novel is set abroad a sealing schooner called the *Ghost*. The plot chronicles the history of the class conflict and the change of a shipwreck into a powerful skipper Wolf Larson. Humphrey Van Weydon is saved from the foggy waters of San Francisco Bay and he is taken as a cabin boy despite his protests. At the outset two major characters are introduced; Humphrey Van Weydon and Wolf Larsen. He is a self made man and seer of the industrial system representing the bourgeoisie culture; he has become a tyrannical king in the ship. Larsen’s materialistic philosophy reflects his vision of life within capitalistic society, typified in the plot by the tyrannical organization on the ship. Wolf Larsen hails from an upper class who led a luxurious life; he is well educated as he calls himself as “a scholar and a dilettante in things artistic and history” (31). Van Weyden is forced to assume the role of a powerful dictator and become a hard hearted man. Van Weyden serves as a foil for Larsen. *The Sea Wolf* portrays the destructive powers of the bourgeoisie who crush liberty and individuality of the poor workers. Humphrey Van Weyden represents the superman model of Nietzsche. The novel dramatizes the conflict between idealism and professionalism; between bourgeoisie and the proletariat The drama is heightened by the characterization of Larsen as “the perfect type of primitive man, born a thousand years of generations too late and an anachronism in this culminating century of civilization” (52). B Van Weyden suffers constant shame which forces him to bear the injustices and the cruelties of Larsen’s

capitalism He has observed that Larsen is a superman on the *Ghost* and nobody dares to oppose him as he is dominating and powerful. Larsen is always victorious and enjoys supreme control on others. London opines that the capital system in America enjoys supreme power; the status of the capitalist world order is unchallengeable; it relies on brutal force and strict rules and regulations. After weathering typhoon, he picks up a life boat containing Brewster who is a young beautiful girl. London also introduces the romantic love episodes between Brewster and Larsen and the complicated emotional involvement of Weyden. Larsen

Larsen suffers from the brain tumour that ultimately destroys him. The plot of the novel revolves around the struggle between Wolf Larsen and Van Weyden; there are repeated physical conflicts compelling Van Weyden to develop his own physical powers. On intellectual level, Van Weyden has to fight with the capitalistic policies of Wolf Larsen. Maud Brewster enters in the second half of the novel; she is a woman survivor from the *Martinez* and both Van Weyden and Wolf Larsen fight for her love. So the novel has three important threads; it is a story of the conflict between the class struggle; it is a story of the physical fights between Van Weyden and Wolf Larsen and importantly is also about the sex rivalries. When the *Ghost* embarks on a journey the cruelty and the struggle for survival begins as the environment on the ship is oppressive and primitive. Van Weyden is given the assignment to help the ship's Cockney cook who is a mean and a cruel character. Van Weyden feels humiliated. Jack London has dramatized the scenes of unwanted psychological pains inflicted on Van Weyden in the novel. Like Conrad's novel *The Heart of Darkness*, London's novel *The Sea –Wolf* is packed with the images of darkness; death and night. Weyden's experiences begin with an immersion in the sea through which he is transformed into a member of the industrial working class. Symbolically his life is saved by Wolf Larsen physically but psychologically and intellectually he is made to suffer an eternal perdition. It can be recalled that Jack London described his fall into English slums in nautical metaphors; he observed that the people of the East End were like a "sea" and he slipped into the sea.

Wolf Larsen has titanic physical strength and endurance and he uses his physical power to terrorize his crew members. Van Weyden calls Wolf Larsen as an "individualist, and a materialist" and Larsen appreciated Weyden for his intellect. He enslaved him to do menial work on the ship and to protect himself from a savage crew. Wolf Larsen believes that power resides in a man's ability to impose his will on the world. He believes in tough measures crushing the individuality of the crew members; he believes in using pure animalistic physical strength. He is a true representative of the cruel capital system which oppresses and exploits the working class Americans. Jack London demonstrates the physical power of Larsen when he assaults on the cabin boy, Leach.

Jack London dramatizes the scene of savage violence symbolizing the cruelty of the capital system. Wolf Larsen is created as a powerful symbol of the heartless capital society which is crossing all barriers to dominate and dehumanize the poor and downtrodden workers belonging to the lower middle classes. Lech is subdued and his individuality is crushed; he is forced to accept th duties seriously and Van Weyden is given the charge of the Cabin boy: "What was I to do? To be brutally beaten, to be killed perhaps, would not help my case" (30). The novel *Sea-Wolf* is an allegory of the cruel capital system; Wolf Larsen is a supreme leader; heading the materialistic organization and his sole purpose is to rule and to impose his will upon others. The main focus of the novel is the class antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat; clearly the plot reveals Van Weyden believes in idealism; his belief in the soul, immortality, humanity and love are contrasted with Wolf Larsen's animalistic violence and physical cruelty. Wolf Larsen is the villain of the novel; the symbol

of the heartless bourgeoisie society committed to accumulate wealth and exploit the working class. He is the Nietzschean superman; the captain of the *Ghost*. Weyden's ideals clash with the brutal materialistic society of Wolf Larsen. Van Weyden gets the first shock when he notices the tragic death of Larsen's first mate. London has depicted the cruelty of the system of Wolf Larsen thus: "the stiffening of his legs, the rolling of his head from side to side, the relaxation of his muscles, and the dropping of his jaw, which exposes two rows of tobacco-discolored teeth" (21).

Van Weyden must accept the bourgeoisie code manufactured by the professional Wolf Larsen. On the *Ghost*, the ideology of Larsen is supreme and all men follow the dictates of Larsen. Weyden's confrontation with Thomas Mugridge is quite significant in the novel as it epitomizes the beginning of his historical transformation. Weyden realizes that must either crush the cook or be crushed by him. Wolf Larsen is a mighty creation of Jack London as "the perfect type of primitive man, born a thousand years or generations too late and an anachronism in this culminating century of civilization" (52). Wolf Larsen notes that Weyden is growing tough adapting himself to his survival code on the ship with sardonic amusement. In the beginning, The entry of Maud Brewster who is a young and beautiful woman changes the pattern of the novel. She is the major character in the novel and she is the renowned poetess. Larsen attacks Maud Brewster and Van Weyden intervenes to save her from sexual oppression. Larsen wants to crush the individuality of Maud Brewster by his animalistic force. The capitalist enjoy the power of money and they are free to destroy any individual; often they rape women who are poor and subjugated working in the factories. Larsen belongs to that category of men. It is a matter of chance that Larsen is stricken with a blinding headache and allows They prepare to await a chance rescue but in the meantime, the *Ghost* is washed up in the beach where they are standing with Larsen alone on the *Ghost*. Larsen is in wretched condition since he has been deserted by his crew; Larsen still represents a threat to the harmony of Weyden and Maud Brewster. His death symbolizes the end of capitalism. Robert C, Tucker describes Karl Marx's theory of freedom for the proletariat thus:

Escape from alienated labor finally become materially possible in the stage of technological development created by modern machine and industry. The way of escape lies in the revolutionary seizure and socialization of the productive powers by the proletariat. (Tucker 12)

Jack London had closely observed the rising wave of socialism in America to fight with the capitalism. His *The Sea Wolf* and *The Iron Heel* are powerful novels dramatizing the class conflict in America. Jack London was greatly impacted by Marxian thought and believed that socialism alone can solve all the economic problems of society. Having restored the schooner, Weyden and Maud Brewster manage to set sail. They are rescued by a U.S. revenue cutter. In the political plot of the novel, Jack London adds the spice of romantic entertainment with the episodes of Weyden and Maud Brewster. In the last scene Weyden says: "One kiss, dear love, one kiss before they come and rescue us from ourselves" (252). The real storyline provides an insight into the political ideas of Jack London. The romantic relations between Weyden and Maud Brewster are simply on the surface of the novel. Jack London depicts the conflict between the bourgeois and the proletariats through the characters of Larsen and Van Weyden. The novel is allegorical but had deep meaning to convey to the masses.

The critics have condemned Jack London for ruining the thematic depth of the novel. In fact, the novel *The Sea-Wolf* of Jack London is a historical document depicting the class struggle in America and the need for social reforms. It is the confrontation of the civilized Van

Weyden with the primordial nature of Larsen which reveals the real message of Jack London. He also wanted to depict the fall of the Nietzschean hero because of his imperfections. But the real focus of Jack London is on the contemporary issue of the class conflict and the need for social reforms.

Weyden perceived that Larsen's strength transcended the physical realm. It is "an immense vigor or virility of spirit that lies behind and beyond and goes out of sight. (17). In the capital class to which Larsen belongs, violence and brutality become virtues and the guiding principles. Indeed at times, Larsen's feats reached superhuman proportions. Set upon by seven strong men in the fore-castle of the ship, he climbed a ladder by the might of his arms, the whole pack of men striving to draw him back and down; no man less than a giant could have done what he did" (95). Jack London has dramatized a scene of brutal violence of Wolf Larsen thus: "He kicked him with "heavy boots and knocked him down mercilessly. He became blind and couldn't see any more" (80). Larsen "struck a blow which hurled him "back like a cork, driving his head against the wall with a crash" (80). The whole novel is packed with the scenes of brutality and violence. The novel *The Sea-Wolf* is a memorable study because of the confrontation with Wolf Larsen of the crew on the ship. The details of the scenes of violence are sensational; the novel is action packed. The significance of the sadism and narcissism of *The Sea Wolf* lies in the fact that they represent individualism. Wolf Larsen is also womanish; Van Weyden repeatedly mentions Weyden is terribly impressed with Larsen's ability with the bottle: "Wolf Larsen was unaffected by the drink, yet he drank class for glass, and if anything his glasses were fuller. There was no change in him" (54). The character of Wolf Larsen is appealing to Van Weyden and to understand their relationship is perhaps to comprehend the dialectical relationship between the master and the slave in the capital system. The character of Larsen can be analyzed in three parts. Larsen is an image of self-made man; adventurous and lustful of money and power like a true capitalist. Weyden belongs to the blood of the Nordies but his life began in abject poverty.

Wolf-Larsen as the Representative of Heartless Capitalism

The muscular captain is also a great intellectual. The novel symbolizes the tastes of the bourgeoisie class of America. Larsen is committed to a certain ideology and he works accordingly in running the ship. He is a representative of the cruel capital system of America and London has taken special pains in portraying his colossal heartless physical structure. His character may be analyzed in three parts: his magnetic physical prowess; his authority and power and his philosophy. Weyden is both attracted and repelled by the presence of Wolf Larsen. Weyden has to adjust to the master-slave relationships that link him to Larsen, Murgidg is also his superior but he struggles to crush him but he doesn't dare to pick up a row with Larsen. He is scared of his exceptional superhuman physical strength and force of authority. Larsen is highly impressed by the intellectual acumen of Van Weyden so he often sends for him and engages him in a philosophical discussion. In his good mood he enjoys talking on poetry and other philosophical matters with Van Weyden and this privilege is enjoyed by any other crew on the *Ghost*.

To conclude, Larsen firmly believes that his death "had been peaceful in its occurrence, sacred in its ceremonial" (22). London has given his view of life in this novel; "Van Weyden's reaction to this philosophy is to point out the utter hopelessness of such an existence" (171). Larsen asserts that life itself is the end of existence: "We want to live and move, though I have no reason to, because it happens that it is the nature of life to live and move, to want to live and move" (12). Van Weyden charges that Larsen makes a mockery of life. Larsen answers: "Life? Bah! It has no value. Of cheap things it is the cheapest. Life eats

life till the strongest and the most piggish life is left; the only value of life has is what life put upon itself” (17). Van Weyden is of the opinion that in the society might is right; the capitalists are powerful and they rule and dominate over the helpless and powerless poor working classes. Larsen is all powerful; his physically strong; known for his brutal violence since he has created an atmosphere of terror in the Ghost. His view of life is based on the primitive philosophy of the survival of the fittest. Weyden has also learnt that it is important to be strong and united to solve the ills of society.

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