

## On the Reflection of Naturalism in the characters in *The Sea Wolf*

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### Abstract:

*The Sea Wolf* is a psychological adventure novel by an American novelist Jack London, published in 1904. The book's protagonist, Humphrey van Weyden, is a literary critic who is a survivor of an ocean collision and who comes under the dominance of Wolf Larsen, the powerful and amoral sea captain who rescues him. It combines elements of naturalism and romantic adventure. Among numerous works of Jack London, *The Sea Wolf* enjoys a quite high literary status, which is actually known all over the world, which western critics have given very high comment. It tells the story of a soft, domesticated protagonist who is forced to become tough and self-reliant by exposure to cruelty and brutality. Naturalism is a scientific method employed here to depict the characters in the novel in which a character's fate has been decided, even predetermined, by impersonal forces of nature beyond human control. The novel is an experiment where the author could discover and analyze the forces, or scientific laws, that influence behavior, and these include emotion, heredity, and environment.

**Keywords:** environment; heredity; nature

### Introduction

*The Sea Wolf* is a masterwork of Jack London's naturalism novel; it is well known in the world. There have been so many scholars keeping studying it from different perspectives of views for nearly one hundred years. My thesis is mainly to study how naturalism is reflected in the portrayal of characters, that is to say, to study how naturalism is reflected in the domination of human fate in *The Sea Wolf*. In proper order, I will study the reflections of naturalism in characters from environment and heredity in order to have a better understanding of naturalism; then I will dig out details about their behaviors that reflect the effect of natural forces.

Here is a brief introduction to this novel. *The Sea Wolf* tells the story of a soft, domesticated protagonist — in this novel's case an intellectual man named Humphrey van Weyden — forced to become tough and self-reliant by exposure to cruelty and brutality. The story starts with him aboard a San Francisco ferry, called Martinez, which collides with another ship in the fog and sinks. He is set adrift in the Bay, eventually being picked up by Wolf Larsen. Larsen is the captain of a seal-hunting schooner, the Ghost. Brutal and cynical, yet also highly intelligent and intellectual (though highly biased in his opinions, as he was self-taught), he rules over his ship and terrorizes the crew with the aid of his exceptionally great physical strength. Van Weyden adequately describes him as an individualist, hedonist, and materialist. Larsen does not believe in the immortality of the soul; he finds no meaning in his life save for survival and pleasure and has come to despise all human life and deny its value. Being interested in someone capable of intellectual disputes, he somewhat takes care of Van Weyden, whom he calls 'Hump,' while forcing him to become a cabin boy, do menial work, and learn to fight to protect himself from a brutal crew.

In the introduction to Jack London. He was born in San Francisco on January 12th of 1876. He had another name called John Griffith London. he was supposed to be a believer of socialism. *The Call of the Wild*, *The Sea Wolf*, *White Fang*, and *Martin Eden* were all his outstanding works. He was good at developing a unique writing style of his own, making the choice of words, sentence structure, and paragraph structure to convey the meaning effectively .

Jack London led a miserable but meaningful life in his young age. He experienced much more pains than others who were of the same age; he was extremely independent when he was young, and therefore, he possessed some useful skills for his survival. And it is his abundant personal experiences that have helped him gain some achievement in his literary career.

Jack London is a resolute and stubborn man. He prefers an adventurous life to a settled one. He regards adventure as a pleasure and sees risk as a joy. Most works of Jack London are masculine, doughty,

aggressive and energetic. He likes to record his own personal experiences in his works. His works are not only welcomed by ordinary readers, but also appreciated by scholars. Some people believe that Jack London's works are full of vitality and optimism, others think that it is the combination of civilization, spirit, and courage. Jack London's works are praised as highly original, he has a great fame and lofty status in modern American literature and also world literature.

## 1. Introduction to naturalism

Naturalism is a kind of new critical realism. It was formed under the war and social turmoil which affected people's beliefs in early ages. Naturalism usually goes against the validity of moral truths that were widely accepted by the majority of people. It's because it wants to get the extreme of objectiveness and frankness. The characters they portray are usually from the lower class, whose destiny is restricted by environment and heredity. In terms of reflecting life, naturalism writers tend to show the feature of sentimentalism of early romanticism. What is different from romanticism is that naturalists take the attitude that the world is lack of morality, whether man or woman has no willing of freedom, their lives are controlled by heredity and environment. And they are people who lead a miserable life when they are alive but forgotten by others after they are dead. Though naturalism reveals the weakness of the world by way of extremely strict realistic technique, it sometimes paves the way to improve the world through social reform.

With the development of economy, science, and culture, affected by European naturalistic literature, America naturalism literature formed at late 19<sup>th</sup> century and kept active until now. It enjoyed quite an important status in America history of literature. It has attracted every generation of writers to combine naturalistic traditions into their writing.

## 2. The influence of environment on the mind of characters

### 2.1 natural environment

In general, the natural environment plays a crucial role in the formation of human character, about which Jack London had some concrete descriptions. He wrote that *"the sea had turned a dull leaden grey and grown rougher, and was now tossing foaming whitecaps to the sky. We were traveling faster and heeled farther over. Once, in a gust, the rail dipped under the sea, and the decks on that side were for the moment awash with water that made a couple of the hunters hastily lift their feet"*. From the last sentence, it can be concluded that sailors on the ship are quite afraid of a stormy day, they are scared that their lives are in enormous danger in such a frightful day. Therefore, people in such kind of an environment grow an extremely strong sense of self-protection with them. In any case, they will work out every possible way to work together for safety or to protect themselves from danger.

There are many other examples to show how natural factors take effect in the development of characters. For example *"my first thought was that a man who had come through a collision and rubbed shoulders with death merited more attention than I received. Beyond a sailor at the wheel who started curiously across the top of the cabin, I attracted no notice whatever."* People who narrowly escaped from a collision should have attracted more care and more attention, but it is not fact. On the contrary, just because people on the ship witnessed too many deaths, they got no feeling about it.

### 2.2 Social environment

No one can live without being affected by the people around him in social contact. In a hard and cruel environment, People at the bottom of the society are squeezed heavily. As Larsen said: *"and who eat the food the other men get and would like to eat themselves. You wear warm clothes. They made the clothes, but they shiver in rags and ask you, the lawyer, or business agent who handles your money, for a job"*. This

passage showed us that at that time America's capitalist society was a society that people was living in a terrible condition of "people eat people," which was extremely cruel. No matter how hard the workers worked, they were bound to be squeezed heavily by bosses.

*"The relations among the men, strained and made tense by feuds, quarrels and grudges, were in a state of unstable equilibrium, and evil passions flared up in flame like prairie-grass"* Why relationship between people could be like that? Why did people pay so much attention to fame and fortune? Yes, they simply have a strong desire for wealth!

### 3 Genetic effects on characters

#### 3.1 The existence of savagery

In *The Sea Wolf*, there is born cruelty and savagery in the characters, and some of them are controlled by genes originated from their ancestors.

Here comes with some examples, *"Now you know me as I am generally known. Other men call me "Wolf."* *"It was a primitive mode of reasoning and of looking at things that he understood thoroughly."* One of the main characters, Larsen, believes that life has no greater purpose than its own survival. In Wolf's view, his size, intellect, and strength are enough to justify his actions. He is stronger, and so he is allowed to prey on the weak because there is no larger purpose. In this way, he acts entirely without conscience at all, without the philosophical ability to care about others, a type of savage men.

#### 3.2 The return of atavism

Atavisms are sudden reversions to ancestral morphological features in very small proportions of individuals of a population. In this novel, Larsen is a typical representative of atavism. *"He was a magnificent atavism, a man so purely primitive that he was of the type that came into the world before the development of the moral nature. He was not immoral, but merely unmoral."* Larsen looks like the same as an average person, but he does not know what moral means.

Though he lives roughly in the same way as the surrounding people, goes sleeping, eating, drinking and so on, he has the wolf's brutality and ruthlessness in his heart. His indifference to life, to mercy, nearly to everything is a mirror of his atavism.

Somewhat affected by Larsen and some other sailors, Van Weyden also has atavism in a similar way. What must be noticed is that Larsen helps to inspire some of atavism in Van Weyden. When Van Weyden is to hunt seals to decorate their house on the Endeavour Island, he thinks of the original life of ancient ancestors, which was all about hunting in the forest. Thus, he did the same. So Van Weyden himself has an atavism in his deep heart; it is just waited to wake up. But what arouses Van Weyden's atavism? It must be something related to survival. In order to save himself and Maud's lives, he had to hunt even if he was not willing to.

#### 3.3 presence of bravery

Bravery needs much courage and power; it is much valued at the times of immediate danger, it is also passed down from human ancestors when involved in a fight for survival. it is the case in this novel.

When faced to the choice of life and death, Maud's bravery is brought back. After seeing her lover involved in danger, she couldn't stand by anymore. she stands up and works up her courage to fight against Larsen. Under the dilemma, her self-defense is well awakened. Life is the most important thing in this

condition, and anything should make way for it. Maud does it without any hesitance. Because of Maud's bravery, Van Weyden's life and hers are saved, even Van Weyden is surprised at her brave behaviors. In this way, they come back to the land again in the end and enjoys life as they did before.

Similar to savagery and atavism, bravery is also something genetic. For quite a lot of people, genes have played a role in a way unknown to them and determined their daily behaviors.

## 4 Enlightenment to life

### 4.1 Fight against ill fate

There is always something valuable for us to learn about the characters in the novel. Under the harsh living condition , in order to survive , Van Weyden and Maud are brave enough to declare war on their fate, to challenge the misfortune and to free themselves of oppression from Wolf Larsen.

In *The Sea Wolf*, Van Weyden and Maud obtain "new life." After they escape from the "Ghost," they drift to an island called Endeavour Island, a place where there is no food, no house, even no any materials for daily use. But they do not lose heart; they go to seek anything they could find to survive. On the island, they begin their new life. they get to the abandoned ship to find out whether there are remaining grain reserves, or they would eat the seal meat. In a word, they would think of some way to survive. Since there is no house on the Endeavour Island, they come up with a solution, which is to build a wall by laying bricks and use the seal skins as the roof. In this way, they complete the building of their house. Though Endeavour Island is a place where they just stay for a short time, they still make life on the island well, which prove that they wouldn't be defeated by the miserable fate.

### 4.2 Will to survive

Life is precious to everyone, especially to those living in unbelievably hard condition. The setting in the novel is a world of human jungle. Why are people on the "Ghost" brutal to one another? It is because they are trapped in a vicious environment. If they do not show their power and muscles , they would be "eaten" by others.

In *The Sea Wolf*, the author has ever used jelly-fish to describe the life of lower class many times. And it is quite vivid. Larsen said "*They move; so does the jellyfish move. They move in order that they may keep moving. There you have it. They live for their belly's sake, and the belly is for their sake. It's a circle; you get nowhere. Neither does them. In the end, they come to a standstill. They move no more. They are dead.*" These sentences reveal the hardship of people in life and their helplessness of struggling life. However, it also echoes the author's sympathy to the people from the lower class.

Usually, people would connect the word "survival" with something bloody, killing and cruel. But, what we should understand is that the will to live means more , which is often ignored by us.

### 4.3 The pursuit of a normal life

We must have heard this: "Good life is created by our own hand." Therefore, when we have ensured our basic life, we can arrive at a higher stage, which is to pursue the quality of life. Van Weyden and Maud give us the best example. Though they lead a smooth and steady life on the Endeavour Island., they still want to break away from this place when it is possible. Why it's because they are just normal people and are eager to lead a normal life, so they try all means to leave. they choose to flee since they look forward to living in a flat for a stable and safe life in the future and get close to modern civilization.

The determination to lead a normal life for Van Weyden and Maud fully indicate that they are filled with hope to live in their inner heart, And since they have a positive attitude to life, they dare to pursue a normal life bravely. This is a kind of encouraging behavior in hard environments. Thus, so long as hope for better life stays and so long as you can make great efforts you can obtain what you want.

## Conclusion

From what has been discussed above, it can be concluded that my thesis is concentrated on one point: How naturalism is applied to show the power of environment and hereditary on characters? The novel presents us a cruel, uncaring world, where only the strong prosper. It is a perfect Darwinian world, and London's depiction of it owes much to Charles Darwin, who proposed the theory of evolution to explain the development of competition for scarce resources. The term , often used to describe Darwin's theory, although he did not coin it, is "the survival of the fittest," a phrase that describes human experience perfectly.

This novel is a true reflection of American life in the late 19th century; the United States was in the period when the pursuit of money was extremely fierce after the Civil War. The whole country was overrun under the law of the jungle. Everyone competed with each other in a cruel competition for survival, status, honor and wealth.

The *Sea Wolf* tells us too many truths, such as proper ways to handle love, ways to face the cruel world and ways to pursue what you want to have. Then, about survival, hard life experiences have told us that one must have a desire for survival and know how to live well in an appropriate way. All these may be an enlightenment to the improvement of readers' mind.

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