

SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY OF JACK LONDON IN “WHAT LIFE MEANS TO ME”

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Abstract. This article explores the life and literary contribution of Jack London, a famous American author whose writings are deeply rooted in his own experiences of struggle, social issues, and the quest for a better existence. Born in 1876, London's formative years were filled with poverty and neglect, shaping the themes of his later works. His novels, such as “The Sea-Wolf” and “Martin Eden”, explore powerful ideas of survival, ambition, and social injustice. Even after gaining fame, London grappled with financial difficulties and a sense of disillusionment with society, prompting him to challenge the hypocrisy of the wealthy in his autobiographical essay, “What Life Means to Me”.

Keywords: struggle, luxurious, upper class, life, an autobiographical essay.

INTRODUCTION.

Jack London is considered a renowned American short story writer, publicist, social figure, and novelist. He authored over 200 short stories, 20 novels, and 3 plays. Born in 1876 in San Francisco, his real name was John Griffith Chaney. His father, William Chaney, was an astrologer, and his mother was a music teacher. Since his father refused to acknowledge him as his son, and his mother, with despair, left him under the guidance of a servant named Virginia Prentiss.

Years later, his mother, Flora Wellman, took him back. Jack London received his name from his stepfather, John London. Throughout his life, Jack maintained close ties with his stepsisters, especially cherishing the affection of his sister Eliza, which he often mentioned in his writings.

The future writer's life was marked by hardship and vagrancy. When his family moved to Oakland, he managed to finish elementary school. Due to poverty, Jack London worked tirelessly day and night – selling newspapers for money and sometimes laboring in a cannery. In 1893, he began working as a sailor on the *Sophie Sutherland* ship. He also worked in laundries at times. Naturally, the hardships he endured were reflected in his literary works, such as *The Sea-Wolf* and *Martin Eden*.

Jack London's first published sketch, "Typhoon off the Coast of Japan", came out in 1893. After winning a literary contest, he received a \$25 prize, which became the turning point for his literary career. Unfulfilled by his high school education, he left school and began preparing to enter the University of California. After successfully passing the exams, he was admitted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.

In 1897, he joined friends in an expedition to Alaska to search for gold. His northern adventures later found artistic expression in his works. His northern stories were published in 1899. In 1900, his short story collection *The Son of the Wolf* was released, followed by collections like *Children of the Frost* (1902), *Moon-Face* (1906), and *Lost Face* (1910). His major novels include *The Daughter of the Snows* (1902), *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), and *Martin Eden* (1909). Jack London continued his literary work by writing 15–17 hours a day. His fiction was deeply rooted in realism and emphasized human belief and passion.

In 1907, during his voyage aboard his own boat, *Snark*, he wrote works such as *South Sea Tales*, *The Cruise of the Snark*, and *The Son of the Sun*. Later, he bought a ranch and began farming.

By the end of 1910, a fort named “Wolf House” was built on his ranch, but after it was burned down, London sank into debt. To pay off his debts, he was forced to write shallow stories for popular magazines. As his creativity declined, he began selling new plots. Literary scholars suggest that “in 1916, Jack London committed suicide, having foreshadowed his own death in *Martin Eden*.”

Jack London also wrote an autobiographical essay titled *What Life Means to Me*, he shares the following insights in it: Growing up in a working-class family, he had his fate determined early on. He always saw himself as a representative of the lower class and believed that it required immense effort to rise to the upper class. From a young age, London lived in a dream world filled with ambition, though his surroundings were bleak. Despite enduring hunger and hardship, he always strived for greatness.

He developed a strong desire to escalate up the career ladder through his own efforts and imagined himself living in a luxurious palace. In his dreams, people wore elegant clothes and dined at luxurious restaurants. Though obsessed with a lavish lifestyle, London, raised in a working-class household, found it difficult to attain.

In *What Life Means to Me*, he begins by describing his ranch in California, emphasizing that wealth can only be achieved through hard work and sweat. He believed that a person who relies solely on themselves and works tirelessly until age fifty can live a prosperous life. Despite growing up in constant struggle, he could never escape the grip of poverty.

In the chapter “Prince of the Oyster Pirates,” he takes his first entrepreneurial steps – buying a boat and equipment to hunt oysters. But the business ends in failure after he is attacked by pirates and robbed of everything. Left helpless, London did not want to resemble those in the upper class who got rich off others' labor. He viewed a life without hard work as a path to ruin. At times, London wandered across the United States, living in rundown shelters. In the section “The Misuse of My Strength,” he expresses disappointment with his fate and laments his failures, even developing fear at the thought of dreaming. Life seemed reduced to finding shelter and food. Surrounded by profit-driven merchants and businessmen who measured everything in money, London realized that mere hard work had little monetary value – yet he maintained faith in his own strength to achieve success.

He noted that while traders could sell their goods in the market and build their business, laborers grew physically weaker with time. Forced to spend most of his life in basements, he had no choice but to wait for fortune to smile upon him.

CONCLUSION.

In the “Rebel Sociologist” chapter, London returns to California, broadens his outlook by reading more about society, and begins calling himself a sociologist, enriching his thinking with scientific theories. He criticized selfishness – a key social virtue – and realized that to succeed, one must endure hardship. Once he began selling his writings, he earned some money and, after socializing with high-ranking individuals at shared dinners, started to feel a glimpse of happiness. He even began meeting elegant gentlemen and mingling with businessmen, professors, publishers, and politicians to study their manners.

Still, he concluded that only a few aristocrats exhibited genuine culture. London wanted to understand how factory owners amassed great wealth so quickly and were puzzled by how publishers took control of printing houses. He also noted that successful entrepreneurs often

betray their friends in business. He lamented that noble individuals were becoming increasingly rare. London could not turn a blind eye to society's hypocrisy, immorality, and lack of culture.

*"Such is my outlook. I look forward to a time when man shall progress upon something worthier and higher than his stomach when there will be a finer incentive to impel men to action than the incentive of today, which is the incentive of the stomach. I retain my belief in the nobility and excellence of the human. I believe that spiritual sweetness and unselfishness will conquer the gross gluttony of today. And last of all, my faith is in the working class. As some Frenchman has said, "The stairway of time is ever echoing with the wooden shoe going up, the polished boot descending."*¹

Ultimately, he admitted that he could not live in the environment of the upper class. He missed his old friends and found honest working class companions more valuable than the rich. He wished to return to the past which was filled with love and true happiness. London always dreamed of finding joy and, in the end, returned to the community of workers where he had grown up. The dazzling world of the elite, once so alluring, had lost its charm for him. Jack London decided to clean up the cold basements with his old friends and create a new environment. London wanted to see values like purity, nobility, and honesty in people, believing that only then one could truly see *the life he had understood*.

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