

Jack London's Contributions to American Literature

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Jack London means many things around the globe. He was a pivotal writer at the turn of the century whose literary naturalism and socialism reveal one also had important effects on the literatures of many nations, including, first the United States, but by the year 2000, also in nearly 100 separate languages. He led a non-stop life full of his great love of the land and sea, advanced ideas about agriculture, adventuring abroad, sailing, socialism, photography. His marriage to his second wife was intensely loving. His personal biography is so compelling that many may not fully appreciate his status as a contributor to literature. For the sake of space, I will only note a few important things I believe are important to know about his contribution to literature.

First: Influence and Vision. It is hard to imagine the advent of an Upton Sinclair, Ernest Hemingway, or Cormac McCarthy, perhaps even Faulkner, without the “Naturalists” and especially Jack London. These—Frank Norris, also a Californian; Stephen Crane; Theodore Dreiser; and Edith Wharton—are usually listed as authors intent upon exposing the deterministic world of uncaring Darwinian struggle for survival. Norris was the only one of them that had a theory of naturalism, which he learned from Émile Zola's naturalistic 20-volume French saga of the decline of a set of French families. They focused on topics the former generation of “Realists,” especially as voiced by the literary lion of the age, William Dean Howells, editor of both *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's*, the most prestigious literary outlets of the day, found

unacceptable. Even Mark Twain, despite his inimitable realism and incessant attacks upon God and the universe, was a bit fussy about class, gender, sexuality and Native Americans.

But London's naturalism does not offer only bleak despair in the face of what he called Nature in the Yukon: the "White Silence"; instead, as a Socialist, he offers a hope that humanity if it is united in comradeship and brotherhood could rise above or at least survive the cold dictates of giant Pacific storms, horrors such as the Chilkoot Trail, or human disasters like the homeless of the East End of London he wrote about in *The People of the Abyss*. In the end, though he was passionately naturalistic in his outlook, he was also passionately idealistic in his hopes for his fellow man and woman.

His work transformed fiction. His influence was immediate and global after the publication of *The Call of the Wild* in 1903, but he was not only influential in his Klondike stories, but in his tales of the Pacific, his socialist speeches, even horror stories. He wrote the most famous autobiography of alcoholism, *John Barleycorn*. He invented the first prize-fight story, and made as his hero a skinny teen boxing for money in Los Angeles to buy guns for the Mexican Revolution. He wrote feminist novels. He wrote poetry and plays.

Jack London envisioned a world for every working man or woman, slave, writer/artist or anyone, in which his chosen method of "Sincerity" as a cardinal virtue would be realized. He also wrote for the general public—scattered over many nations—stories that seemed elemental on one level, but rich with myth and symbol on other levels.

Second: Diversity. He once gave a lecture in Honolulu on “The Language of the Tribe” in which he advocated Americans learning Japanese and vice versa. His heroes are always quite diverse: Russians and Americans in the Klondike; Indians; a rough-and-tumble crew aboard a North Pacific sealing ship; Californians from Truckee to Mexico; South Sea Islanders, lepers in Hawai’i and many more. One of his most unlikely heroes is a runaway slave in “Mauki.” Based on a true tale the Londons heard on Lowe Howe Atoll near the end of the *Snark* journey, Mauki was the son of a chief on the island of Malaita in the Solomons. He is kidnapped and sold many times, and each time he is enslaved to backbreaking work on coconut plantations, with European masters, he escapes. Finally he is owned by Bunster, a notoriously cruel German who has already killed three of his native wives. He enjoys tormenting Mauki, especially slaps with a shark-skin glove. But the blackwater fever sends him to his bed in weakness. Mauki removes all of his white skin with the glove and then takes his head, goes home to his own island, makes peace with the white companies, and rules in fat contentment with four wives, having fulfilled his destiny, meditating upon a blonde head. Who else at the turn of the century would write such story respecting Mauki’s dignity? Seriously?

It would have to have been Jack London. There just wasn’t anybody else from white America or Europe that was capable of crossing so many waters. Of course, it is fitting that Jack London is most famous for that classic of classics, *The Call of the Wild*, which is of course about finding yourself and finding your tribe, your mates.