

On Jack London's Semi-Autobiographic Masterpiece on ART, 'Martin Eden',

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Abstract The article aims at focusing on some elements of Jack London's life as a naturalistic writer as reflected in 'Martin Eden'. The article, in a different way from other research work, will start with the elaboration of the background to the novel's setting as related to Jack London's own experiences and make a connection of that with Martin Eden. It was written in 1909 and mythologizes Jack London's rise from obscurity to his early death at forty, a prophesies. When London wrote Martin Eden he was at the age of 33, he had already achieved international acclaim with 'The call of the wild', 'The sea-wolf' and 'White Fang'. However, London quickly became disillusioned with his fame and set sail to write his next masterpiece. The second part of this article will make a distinction between the two modes of fiction reflected in Martin Eden, that of the novel of success as well as the novel of education. Further it will elaborate on issues as idealism, socialism and realism and Jack London's stand. The article will continue with literary criticism about how this novel was received. Finally, as developed in preceding parts of this article, it will be concluded that it is not difficult to see that Martin Eden was the victim of the two pairs of conflicts, his (Jack London's) personal tragedy was also that of his society and his time. Hence, no individual can isolate himself from the society in which he was born and brought up, and so did Jack London.

Keywords: fiction, Jack London, idealism, writer, naturalism, determinism, Martin Eden.

Introduction

Jack London wrote pretty much about the truth and was very much willing to accept the sordid details of life. He was the author of three autobiographical novels wanting the readers to know how Jack London had lived, as a tramp, a struggling writer, and an alcoholic. His three autobiographical novels were, The road followed by Martin Eden, and finally John Barleycorn. Martin Eden was written in 1909 and mythologizes Jack London's rise from obscurity to his early death at forty, a prophesies. London compressed twelve years of his own life into three for Martin. When London wrote Martin Eden he was at the age of 33, he had already achieved international acclaim with 'The call of the wild', 'The sea-wolf' and 'White Fang'. However, London quickly became disillusioned with his fame and set sail to write his next masterpiece.

Background of the novel and two modes of writing in one novel

It is said that London confronted himself when he wrote Martin Eden. The novel was written during the cruise of the Snark, when the author was undergoing difficult financial times. The farther London was travelling from California, the more detached and virtual his deeds became and more and more his pending issues got complicated. Whilst writing about the life of Martin based on his own, Jack became more and more aware and critical about the American dream. Indeed the evolution of Martin Eden's character is not a romantic journey toward an ideal understanding of the world expressed through his fascination with Spenserian unification theories, but is an existential journey as he leaves the Eden-like structure of the old world for the fragmentary nature of the modern age. On board of the Snark London's anxiety increased and he began to question his own achievements and like Martin London began to question if he had become a newspaper personality. "He drove along the path of relentless logic to the conclusion that he was nobody, nothing," London writes, "Martin Eden the famous writer was a vapor, that had risen from mob mind". The tone of the novel conveys despair and distress. However, the author is most sincere, however harsh and severe as reality is. This is a novel where the writer accepts that something had gone wrong with his life and evolves into a prose as much about the death of artistic consciousness as about growth.

London mentions the idea of writing Martin Eden in his Post Klondike Notes, where the author emphasizes the destruction of love and art by a materialistic society as well as literary struggles. Then in his "Sociological study" he mentions an artist's survival amid poverty and isolation. All of these notes are proof that London was gradually shaping his ideas around the struggling artist novel. In the initial draft cast of the characters of Martin Eden, London had collected his brother in Law, Higginbotham, a businessman, his sister, Mrs. Bernard Higginbotham., his other sister Marian and her husband Herman Von Schmidt, in order that Martin, himself, would suffer the animosity of his two brothers in law. Another

character which London shaped according George Sterling was named Russ Brissenden. London had always stated that Martin was a version of him, himself.

The original title of the novel was ironically "Success" however the novel involves two different writing modes, thus, the novel of success and that of education. Martin indeed succeeds according to the standards his society has imposed on him, in spite of not savoring his achievements. Jack London writes a rag-to-riches story with Ruth Morse discovering a rough diamond in Martin, wanting to polish him to be transform into a suitable object for her upper middle class society."He was clay in her hands immediately and she was passionately wanting to mould him into the image of her ideal man" (M.E. pg.84). Ruth continuously corrects his sentences and manners. However this is not enough as Butler's repudiation of Martin is quite shocking for Ruth. Martin, nevertheless falls in the same situation he had scorned Butler on. He will live a wasted life with values he had tried to reject. After his first visit at the Morses, Martin is disgusted by the places, people, habits he had previously been with. It was the first time he was coming to terms with himself and "he burned with shame as he stared at the vision of his infamy". Whilst having dinner with the Morses, Martin's shirt "is wet with sweat from the exertion of doing to many unaccustomed things at once". After his first encounter with disgust, he was never again ashamed of his own people, places and habits. It seems as if it were a comedy of manners when Martin leaves the Morses, he starts observing "the beautiful things that women wear when they do not have to do their own laundering". The center of this novel is the consciousness of Martin, the consciousness of an artist. Martin has an extraordinary imagination which he uses when he writes. He has an innate artistic sensibility which with him growing develops into an artistic belief. Martin however becomes disillusioned with art as he finds himself continuously fighting between surviving and his devotion to art.

Martin Eden is also considered as a novel of the education of an artist. Martin is very interested in beauty, music, books from the very beginning. Jack London when describing these feelings uses the words "hunger" and "thirst", rooting his sense of beauty in taste. Martin develops his artistic consciousness in an economic system where the artistry is just another service in the free market. Martin studies books of etiquette, learns English grammar as if it were a foreign language, rehearses the way he walks in order to avoid his sailor like style. Same as London, Martin loves books, and with Ruth's assistance he becomes an expert of contemporary literature. With his education progressing, unfortunately, he becomes aware that Ruth is only trying to impress him with bourgeois values. Martin becomes that efficient that he starts defeating professors visiting the Morses. He studies the magazines, analyzes literary markets and writes anything that will bring him money. After much a long time magazines begin to buy his stories and immediately he becomes something of a value, that can sell well.

Martin Eden's story is a dark and heavy one, as the artist will pay a heavy price for his success. Ruth offers him knowledge, and Martin loses paradise, Eden. "It's too late, I'm a sick man-oh not my body! It is my soul, my brain. I seem to have lost all values, I care for nothing!" (M.E., p.334)

Idealism, socialism, realism and Martin Eden (Jack London)

There are many who consider Martin Eden as an eulogy on individualism. Indeed, Martin Eden is not a perfect individualist: he looks for consolation and closeness with the working people. Martin Eden may also considered be as aiming to approach the American Dream, however, it was not really meant to portray the American Dream. The depiction of it is left to later generations of writers, such as Theodore Dreiser, Scott Fitzgerald, John Steinbeck and Earnest Hemingway. According to Jack London Martin's suicide is a condemnation of his being an individualist.

Jack London had intentionally written Martin Eden as an attack to individualism and Nietzsche's superman theory. Martin Eden began to live for ideal, for belief. In his eyes, all things seemed to be beautiful, simple and pure. As for love, he felt Ruth was his angel, Ruth was a pure, beautiful, woman, different from those women who always showed up around him. He would do everything for Ruth. The belief "God's lover will die for a kiss" can prove what Martin considered of real love, but he blindly put the kind of love into idealism. After Martin went through the broken engagement from Ruth, he became aware that his love was much weak, Ruth the kind of woman, as all the women who think of status, money, as standards of love. Realism starts to surface on Martin at this part of the novel. He lived on the ideal of love and beauty, as an artist would do, all of his efforts to become an intellectual, unlike, Butler, were based on idealism. However, Martin's dream to find real love was broken. He fell into deep sufferings. Martin's purpose was to write for love, for beauty, for nature. His works though were not published before his momentum neared. Because of his simple thoughts, he did not pay attention to the forms of literature during his period. He "could" not offer the readers of his time attractive works. Martin was confused and found himself divided between idealism and realism. He wrote with inspiration and all magazines snatched to publish his works after he was famous. Although Martin realized the hypocrisy of his society, he could not calm his heart. He had already lost himself wanting to be educated and he did not know what he had to do.

What's more, the so-called noble bourgeois and upper-class were superficial rather than noble. The society where the Morses lived was not as healthy and noble as he first thought, so he began to consider going back to nature, where there was his real world, without evil, without sadness. This was just because he bore lots of pressure in the upper middle class society. He also tried to give up the fortune and fame to go back to his working class, and there he could enjoy himself, but he found himself distant. He had been reading too much to be part of his crew now. "He felt a sharp gradation between himself and his shipmates and was wise enough to realize the difference that lay in potentiality rather than achievements (M.E. ch. 9)."

He was puzzled there was not a solution to resolve the kind of paradox between the two worlds, his idealist and the upper-middle class romanticism: "For the first time Ruth gazed upon the sordid face of poverty. Starving lovers had always seemed romantic to her, but she had had no idea how starving lovers lived. She had never dreamed it could be like this." (Jack London, 2001: 174). The extreme difference between these two worlds he had been sailing in made him feel pending, having a sense of no belonging:

"From too much love of living,
From hope and fear set free
We thank with brief thanks giving
Whatever gods may be
That no lives forever
That dead men rise up never;
That evens the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea" (Martin Eden: 380).

He chose death because that was the only way to escape conflicts. He had no more songs to sing, in his throat now. Martin Eden swayed back and forth from individualism to socialism. Due to the fact that Martin was an individualist, he seemed not to have suffered as much as Jack London. However, he could not detach himself from conflict that affected much Jack. However he showed himself an individualist, he was at some point a pro-socialist. Choosing to be an individualist, Martin had to certainly stand misunderstandings on his own, look for success without any support, as well as separate himself from the lower-class people. Now and again, Martin, was concerned about working people, his people, due to his inborn generosity and his family history. Martin preserved his natural connections with working people and was ever close to them because:

"He had worked himself; his first memories seemed connected with work, and all his family had worked. There was Gertrude. When her hands were not hard from the endless housework, they were swollen and red like boiled beef, what of washing. And there was his sister Marian. She had worked in the cannery the preceding summer and her slim, pretty hands were all scarred with the tomato-knives. Besides, his father had worked to the last fading gasp; the horned growth on his hands must have been half an inch thick when he died." (Martin Eden: p. 397)

This connection, however, was cut off as a result of Martin's decision to write for fame and money, more than anything, for love and beauty, his Edenic ideals. Initially, the young writer felt no immediate effect as he was involved in the joys of reading, writing and love. In his individualistic struggles, Martin was happy but alone in spite of his virtual companions Spencer, Marx and other thinkers he liked, whom could not be easily perceived by the ignorant working people. Although he belonged to the working class, he had distinguished himself from them by acquiring knowledge from a wide range of books. As a result, he thought of himself as a man different from masses, superior to them physically and mentally. Then he triumphantly set for success as an extreme individualist. During his individualistic development, he elevated himself above the working-class people while and at the same time always held deep concern for them.

Martin was undoubtedly an individualist, in spite of that, he could not wear himself out of his concern for the working people. Consequently, he found himself easily in between socialism and individualism that made him certainly feel lost and derive him towards suicide.

Criticism on Martin Eden

In a letter to Mary Banks Krasky, London had explained to her that he had indeed experienced Martin Eden's occurrences, but with a difference to Martin Eden, he had not committed suicide because he had been saved by socialism. Reviewers had not been positive and appreciative of London's Martin Eden. Martin's advancement as Ruth shows him how to improve his attitude is the same as that of Jack London and Mabel Applegarth. In spite of that, critics made fun of the sailor being turned into a book worm. Critics missed the fact that with London this change really had taken place after he had returned to Oakland from an eight months trip. London wrote with an intense sense of purpose

and the purpose of *Martin Eden* was also missed by the critics. London had written *Martin Eden* as much an attack against the capitalist society and the publishing industry as an autobiography.

"This is a book that missed fire with a majority of the critics. Written as an indictment of individualism, it was accepted as an indictment of socialism; written to show that man cannot live for himself alone, it was accepted as a demonstration that success made for death. Had *Martin Eden* been a socialist he would not have died." On many other occasions he has reiterated such a creative motive by the textual facts *Martin Eden* died. However, the book's actual effect on readers is that *Martin Eden* is an individualistic hero against the establishment, and the socialism seems of little consequence. As a result, critics of his times regarded it as a eulogy on individualism and superman theory. Even socialist reviewers of his times criticized that he had defended for individualism and abandoned his socialistic belief. Jack London had to admit that "one of my motifs, in this book, was an attack on individualism. I must have bungled for not a single reviewer has discovered it." His wife, Charmian (*Believe in my Husband*: 1910, 24) has tried to support his declaration, "Autobiographies of a socialist, *Martin Eden* and *The Sea Wolf* both attack Nietzsche's theory. However, even the socialists failed to perceive it."

Conclusion

In the development of American literary history, Jack London wrote *Martin Eden* serving as a forerunner in depicting the disillusionment of American dream, followed by Dreiser's *American Tragedy* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (*Rebuild American Dream*: 1983).

Martin Eden: "lived a recluse, in each day accomplishing at least three day's labor of ordinary men. He slept a scant five hours, and only one with a constitution of iron could have held himself sown, as he did, day after day, to nineteen consecutive hours of toil." (Jack London, 2001: 153) As London, he, had been happier when he'd lived naturally in the world before his exposure and infatuation with the realm of intellectualism. At the end *Martin* accepts that Ruth and her class had destroyed him with their hating of realism which was essential to him. After too much exposure to philosophy, *Martin* didn't know what to think about. "Something was wrong with his thinking-machine".

Martin's relentless pursuit of the truth, like London, had led him to encounter nothingness. After he embarks on a cruise to the South Pacific to retrace his lost youth like London he realizes it's in vain to try and revitalize oneself once confronted the truth.

His Art, London's Art, had brought him to realize their reality is meaningless. Unlike London, he prefers to die rather than live with it.

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