

Exploring the Myth of the Superior Man Through the Transition of Humphry Van Weyden in London's "The Sea-Wolf"

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ENGLISH X135A-012
Module 10
3/26/2023

At the end of the nineteenth century, the industrial revolution, scientific advances, and previously unimaginable changes in transportation and communication were changing the world. Many, including Jack London, saw the erroneous transposition of evolutionary theory to explain society and social interaction as a way to make sense of a world where church, doctrine, class, and aristocracy were tossed aside by reason, science, upward mobility, and democracy. Authors and readers tried to make sense of it all by telling naturalistic stories like Jack London's "The Sea-Wolf." The novel places the protagonist and narrator, Humphrey Van Weyden, into a series of mental, emotional, and physical challenges that force him to become London's idea of the natural and superior man that was there all the time — stripping away physical weakness and fear of death but keeping intellectual superiority. He did not choose to become this better person, he was forged. Others advocated for a more primitive and self-centered natural state for man. This is shown by London in the contrast between Larsen and Van Weyden and in Van Weyden's trials and subsequent growth.

London sets up the contrast between the protagonist and antagonist with their names. Short and masculine, the author names the antagonist after the intelligent and

ruthless dominant predator of North America at the time, the wolf. The last name is, in turn, short and masculine, Larsen the son of Lars. The protagonist, who will eventually become our hero, has the elegant and lengthy name of Humphry Van Weyden. Humphry is not a manly name, and Larsen makes it worse by shortening it to the derogatory nickname Hump.

Larsen is established as more than a ship captain. He dictates over a sailing schooner even though it is the age of steam, and he ventures out into dangerous waters to kill seals by the hundreds to harvest their pelts. He is a self-centered capitalist who only cares about his own profit and, as we learn later, his own battle against nature. This is best shown when he lets men who tried to kill him live so that they can both help in the harvest of seals and continue their struggle to kill Larsen or be killed by Larsen.

London contrasts this when he has Van Weyden ponder, “I Humphrey Van Weyden, a scholar and a dilettante, if you please, in things artistic and literary should be lying here on a Bering Sea seal-hunting schooner. Cabin-boy! I have never done any hard manual labor, or scullion labor, in my life. I had lived a placid, uneventful, sedentary existence all my days - the life of a scholar and a recluse on an assured and comfortable income” (42).

The two men differ physically as well. Van Weyden states, “My muscles were small and soft, like a woman's” (42) London has Van Weyden describe Larsen as massive and strong. He goes on at length, comparing the strength to that of the “enlarged

gorilla order” (18). Even near the end of the story, Van Weyden must use his intellect to construct devices to erect the ship’s broken rigging while Larsen struggles against his strokes, still having vitality even in the end. After Larsen passes, Ven Weyden blames his physical strength for his death when he says, “He had too great strength” (364).

The contrast set, London shapes Van Weyden into the ideal man by forcing him through trials. London introduces the concept of putting people under stress so they can rise to the occasion or perish when Wolf Larsen forced a green crewman to fix a sail that was stuck. Instead of lowering the sail and repairing it, Larsen insists that Harrison climb out on the rigging. London then uses Van Weyden’s distress over the situation to point out how cheap life is. Larsen says, “Life? Bah! It has no value. Of cheap things it is the cheapest. Everywhere it goes begging. Nature spills it out with a lavish hand. Where there is room for one life, she sows a thousand lives, and it's life eats life till the strongest and most piggish life is left” (68). Then, throughout the book, Larsen challenges Van Weyden to become the strongest and most piggish.

One of the most important and formative challenges Van Weyden faces is his time on Endeavor Island. In London’s version of Robinson Crusoe, Van Weyden and Maud Brewster are stranded on a deserted island with each other, their small boat, the supplies they took with them, and their own resourcefulness. That and an island full of seals. With most of modern life’s conveniences removed, Van Weyden and Brewster become hunter-gatherers. They must be the strongest, or they will not survive.

Van Weyden learns to live with his fear of death when he and Brewster try to kill some seals to get their skin for a roof on their stone shelters. After several encounters that sent him fearfully scurrying to safety, the narrator finally manages his fear. "I shall never forget, in that moment, how instantly conscious I became of my manhood. The primitive deeps of my nature stirred. I felt myself masculine, the protector of the weak, the fighting male. And, best of all, I felt myself the protector of my loved one" (291). London goes on to have Van Weyden explain the transformation. "The youth of the race seemed burgeoning in me, over-civilized man that I was, and I lived for myself the old hunting days and forest nights of my remote and forgotten ancestry. I had much for which to thank Wolf Larsen" (291). London put the character into a stressful situation and then showed how he rose to the occasion. Then, in contemplation afterward, that same character shares London's worldview that as evil as Larsen is, he forced this "over-civilized man" to go back to his primitive roots and find strength, courage, and meaning. The difference is that Ven Weyden found his strength because he needed to defend himself and his loved one, not to prove himself superior to others like Larsen.

In Van Weyden's final physical battle with Larsen, London evokes the caveman instinct that he believes exists in all humans. After almost being choked to death by Larsen, spared only by another stroke, the narrator notices that Maud was about to club Larsen. His response was positive instead of negative. "My heart surged with a great joy. Truly she was my woman, my mate-woman, fighting with me and for me as the mate of a caveman would have fought, all the primitive in her aroused, forgetful of her culture, hard

under the softening civilization of the only life she had ever known” (340).

From the perspective of 120 years later, a society even further removed from the primitive, the narrator’s transformation and revelation can at first seem almost contrived. However, London has set up a contrast between Van Weyden and Larsen to prove how the Superman of Nietzsche is not the strongest and best. Larsen’s Darwinian worldview of eat-or-be-eaten is used to justify his own selfishness and brutality. Rules do not apply to Larsen, he does and takes what he wants, feeling that doing so will conquer nature itself. London then has nature show it does not favor his type, and Larsen slowly has his strength taken away from him by strokes.

For London, the hero is the narrator. Van Weyden gains the primitive strength of the caveman, protecting himself and those he loves. His struggle against nature is not a justification for selfishness. The better man is strong and determined but also civilized. Even in the end, when Larsen is all but helpless, the narrator admits, “I am unable to shoot a helpless, unresisting man” (320). London further underscores the importance of civilization by having Van Weyden use simple mechanical devices to rebuild the sailing rig on the *Ghost*. The primitive, selfish Larsen hacks and slashes but the civilized Van Weyden rebuilds.

The story ends with the narrator and his true love being rescued by the ultimate symbol of the society they have been separated from — a steam-powered United States revenue cutter, an enforcer of law-and-order powered by steam. The closing paragraphs

show the boy getting the girl. London provides a reward to his ideal man — now physically and mentally strong but still driven by intellect and feelings for others.

Works Cited.

London, Jack. Sea-Wolf. United Kingdom, Macmillan, 1937.

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