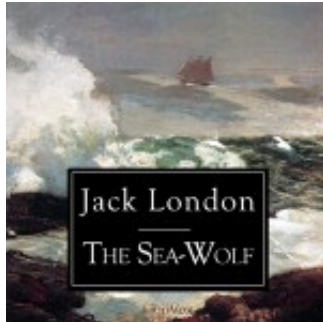


## **The Sea Wolf by Jack London**

**by Rev. Joe Dirt - Monday, October 13, 2014**

<http://www.curmudgeon-alley.com/the-sea-wolf-by-jack-london/>



London is probably best known for his book *The Call of the Wild* and possibly *White Fang*. London had a short but very prolific career. He was first published at 21 and had drunk himself to death by the time he was 40. The actual cause of his death was a morphine overdose. It remains unknown whether it was accidental or a suicide. He detailed his alcoholism in [John Barleycorn or Alcoholic Memoirs](#). In some ways he had great insight into his alcoholism and at the same time practice great denial. He also wrote a very good book on the slums of London, *The People of the Abyss*.

I had not heard of *The Sea Wolf* which only points out my literary ignorance. After reading the book I wondered if they had ever made a movie of it. They have a few times. There is the 1941 version starring Edward G. Robinson. There is a 1993 made for TV movie starring Charles Bronson and Christopher Reeves. There is also a TV mini-series from 2009.

As I was researching the movies I came across a review of the book that stated more than a few critics have called it possibly *The Great American Novel*. I am not sure I would go quite that far, but I would definitely put it high company.

London's characters are so well sketched that they live in the mind long after the last page is turned. His characterization of life aboard a sailing vessel at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had me believing he must have been an old salt of some duration. This is London's genius. He spent a year in the Klondike, and out of that experience came several great books. He shipped on the Snark for two years, and many works flowed from that.

How to classify this book? Is it an adventure story? Is it a morality play? Is it a philosophical treatise? Is it a psychological drama? Or is it, perhaps, a love story? It is all of those. As an adventure story writer, London is at the top of his game. The love story within the adventure story was a little shaky for me. It had a Jane Austen sense or sensibility about it, but not near as well done as an Austen or Bronte book. But the love story while an important piece is not the central theme of the novel.

The protagonist of the story is Wolf Larsen, a man of unrelenting self-interest. He is a person who sees all other humans, as either pawns to be manipulated, or obstacles to be overcome. Early in the book in discussing his philosophy with the narrator, Humphrey van Weyden, he states:

*"I believe that life is a mess," he answered promptly. "It is like yeast, a ferment, a thing that moves and may move for a minute, an hour, a year, or a hundred years, but that in the end will cease to move. The big eat the little that they may continue to move, the strong eat the weak that they may retain their strength. The lucky eat the most and move the longest, that is all. What do you make of those things?"*

*He swept his arm in an impatient gesture toward a number of the sailors who were working on some kind of rope stuff amidships.*

*"They move, so does the jelly-fish move. They move in order to eat 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 do they. In the end they come to a standstill. They move no more. They are dead."*

At a later point he continues the yeast analogy:

*"Not the least bit. Might is right, and that is all there is to it. Weakness is wrong. Which is a very poor way of saying that it is good for oneself to be strong, and evil for oneself to be weak—or better yet, it is pleasurable to be strong, because of the profits; painful to be weak, because of the penalties. Just now the possession of this money is a pleasurable thing. It is good for one to possess it. Being able to possess it, I wrong myself and the life that is in me if I give it to you and forego the pleasure of possessing it."*

*"But you wrong me by withholding it," I objected.*

*"Not at all. One man cannot wrong another man. He can only wrong himself. As I see it, I do wrong always when I consider the interests of others. Don't you see? How can two particles of the yeast wrong each other by striving to devour each other? It is their inborn heritage to strive to devour, and to strive not to be devoured. When they depart from this they sin."*

As I read the book I could not help, but think of Ayn Rand and her philosophy of self-interest and great men. I did a little research trying to ascertain if perhaps she had based her character, Howard Roarke, at least in part, on Wolf Larsen. I could not find any documentation to this effect, but she certainly could have.

Our narrator protagonist, Humphrey van Weyden, aka Hump to Wolf, admires and hates Wolf simultaneously. He admires his self-educated intellect and strong will. At one point when he was dressing Wolf's wounds London was close to being homo-erotic in his description of the Wolf's physique. Bottom line, though, is that Wolf Larsen is a sociopath. He cares for no one except himself. He is sadistic, murderous and villainous.

The character that grows and evolves is Hump. Wolf picks him up adrift in the San Francisco Bay after a ferry wreck. He proceeds to shanghai Humphrey to be his cabin boy on extended sea voyage to hunt seals. Humphrey evolves from a 98 pound weakling to a man capable of standing up to Wolf and the elements of the ocean. London uses the educated urban Weyden as the philosophical sounding board and antagonist for Larsen's philosophy of self-interest. London is somewhat conflicted to me as he is an adamant Socialist in his personal life, but in his writings he seems to glorify the cruelty of nature and the self-reliance of the individual. Weyden attributes his evolving from a weakling to a man capable of standing on his own two legs to Wolf. He is thankful for this, while recognizing that Wolf's method is

not one to be emulated.

This is a book that covers much ground intellectually and stays with you for some time. It is a very satisfying read.

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