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**The Socialist Voice in Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* and
*War of the Classes***

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Abstract:

The present abstract delves into the multifaceted persona of writer Jack London and his examination of socialist issues in his non-fiction writings, with particular emphasis on *The People of the Abyss* and *War of the Classes*. The essay explores the complex viewpoints London offers and questions the idea that he is only a socialist writer. The essay highlights the exploitative character of capitalism and the gap between the affluent and the poor, highlighting London's astute observations of social and economic imbalances in society. This paper analyzes London's view of socialism, highlighting his conviction that a revolution is necessary in both ideas and deeds. It delves into the intricacies of matters like wage labor, surplus labor, and the government's role in mitigating social and economic inequality. Finally, this research implies that London's ideas and ambition for a better society are reflected in his non-fiction publications. It shows how he changed from being a writer who was classified as socialist to someone who was in favor of real, significant change. London's investigation of revolutionary ideas progressively deepens, demonstrating his profound sympathy for the working class's predicament and his wish for a more equitable and peaceful society.

Key Words: Socialism, Capitalism, labor, Non-fiction.

Depending on the type of work of the author that they are evaluating, certain critics of Jack London are more concerned with pigeonholing the writer as a "Boy Socialist," "anarchist," or "individualist." Therefore, rather than experiencing an identity crisis, the author of more than fifty books, essays, short stories, and non-fiction suffers from a plurality of identities rather than an identity crisis. Jack London's non-fictional writings, much like his fictional works, are filled with photographs that he took on his travels throughout the world. This is true of both his fictional and non-fictional works. The goal of this article is to examine a selection of Jack London's non-fictional writings in order to determine whether or not London was able to be freed from the typical confines of socialism, as well as whether or not he was able to go underneath it in order to provide a voice that goes beyond it. His non-fiction works serve as a springboard for approaching and comprehending a number of his fictional works. All of these works, including *The People of the Abyss*, *War of the Classes*, *The Iron Heel*, and *Revolution and Other Essays*, attempted to call into question the oligarchy as well as the injustices done to the working class.



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After spending time in London's East End while on his way to South Africa to report for the American press on the Boer War, London's first social record, *The People of the Abyss*, highlighted the obvious reality about the city's socioeconomic conditions. The fact that London's narrative is one about England written by a burgeoning imperial power, the United States of America, lends it an additional layer of significance as a historical document.

The gap that exists between the wealthy and the less fortunate is one of the fundamental aspects that *The People of the Abyss* hopes to investigate. It is an account that is accurate under all power oligarchies and is not unquestionably bound to any certain era or climate. Benjamin Disraeli, in his exploration of the "two-nation divide," very openly universalizes the problem of poverty and social inequality, which displays the seamy side that is hidden behind the glitter:

“Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other’s habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws.” (Benjamin, 14)

In a similar vein, the book *War of the Classes* exposes the link that exists between labor and capital. He argues that those who belong to the capitalist class are mindless and self-centered, and that the unequal distribution of wealth is the fundamental cause of poverty and inequality in society. This state, which London identifies as the most fundamental defect in the growth of human nature, is severely criticized in London. He is of the opinion that the equality of men is a paradox that cannot be solved, that it is a utopian ideal, and that in order for man to be free, he must be reborn. Despite this, he acknowledges that the power nexus is everywhere and will never be resolved. In contrast to his works of fiction, which frequently provide a way out, his non-fiction explicates the issue at hand while proposing an unlikely answer.

Even though London is often referred to as a socialist writer, which is once again something that is strongly opposed to caging, it is important to remember that his non-fictional writings are not a literary bundle of Marxist political ideas. This is something that must be kept in mind. In this particular conversation on *The People of the Abyss*, it would be rather appropriate to start the observation with a statement made by Sakae Fujiwara, which is as follows:



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In *The People of the Abyss*, he illustrated terribly miserable workers in “The Shambles”, by enumerating uncountable examples which acutely pointed out the mismanagement of capitalist society and drew the conclusion of the sheer necessity of the reorganization of the society. But in this book even when he came to the conclusion of the necessity of the reorganization of society, he did not directly touch socialism or revolution. What he did was to expose the seamy side of society with a strong sense of justice and sympathy. (74).

According to Fujiwara, Jack London is regarded as a socialist writer in Japan, and London's publications such as *The People of the Abyss*, *War of the Classes*, *The Iron Heel*, and *Revolution and Other Essays* are also regarded as socialist works. However, according to Fujiwara, London aimed to provide "justice and sympathy." It should be noted, though, that London did not impose his viewpoint or anticipate a positive result of kindness and charity; instead, he highlighted the dynamics of power dynamics. London scarcely intended to assure sympathy; he desired reform.

The two examples above illustrate the two requirements: the master class is "one of our kind" who permits the property to be leased and does not pay rent, but this does not ensure that he will not do any more acts that are opposite in the future. The second need is that the master class, which survives at the expense of shabbiness but is not completely ruthless, refuses to alter because the tenants are resistant to change. So who is at fault or who is at fault? What is subtly implied in both situations is that the proletariat's situation is not solely dependent on external factors. Sometimes it even takes indifference and inertia to take charge.

Jack London was determined to bring people together in the early phases of a revolution, but he placed no special emphasis on socialist viewpoints. For this reason, when he witnesses the real face of poverty, the young socialist in *The People of the Abyss*, who is blazing with the flames of revolutionary socialism, shudders. London focuses on newspaper records, demonstrating how the media also collapses as tools of the capitalist system or the state, which refuses to acknowledge poverty. The article mentions in passing a woman who is starving to death and how her body was found after neighbors noticed a bad stench coming from her closed-off home. It is interesting to note that in a world of plenty, poverty became their state.



The core reason, which London refers to as "MISMANAGEMENT" in capital letters, is shown to have existed for eons in the last chapter of *The People of the Abyss*. A previous chapter titled "Coronation Day" depicts London's two faces of the imperial authority in a highly scathing way. The actual image reveals how these common and impoverished people are totally excluded from the festivities, despite the imperial power's belief or want to believe that everything is well-organized and that everyone supports the dictatorship.

While the police force is busy with the royal parade to pass undisturbed, the poor utilizes the time to take some rest on the Thames embankments with empty belly and usual hunger. But the irony lies in the favourite Coronation song:

“Oh! on Coronation Day, on Coronation Day,

We'll have a spree, a jubilee, and shout, Hip, hip, hooray

for we'll all be merry, drinking whisky, wine, and sherry, We'll all be merry on Coronation Day” (London *People* 83-84).

London sees people not merrymaking with whisky, wine and sherry, but ragged creatures trying to catch a sleep on a bench on the Thames Embankment. What is pitiful is the ridicule of the passersby towards two such creatures as London sees which exhibited the general heartlessness of the people. When London takes them to eat something, he notices the man and the woman collecting leftover crusts and bread crumbs from nearby plates and pocketing them in their rags. A similar sight is seen earlier too when two such miserable accomplices had collected even orange peels from the streets because they cannot afford to waste them. These are the thousands out of work or physically incompetent or old men and they live and perish in the streets while some may die in the workhouses. London draws the reality of the workhouses which are not only unhygienic and unfit to live, they are also overcrowded and unaccommodative to all.

Very clearly Jack London in his “Preface” to *War of the Classes* states that socialism is not just a doctrine, it is an understanding which the capitalist must learn before raging against it:

The capitalist must learn, first and for always, that socialism is based, not upon the equality, but upon the inequality, of men. Next, he must learn that no new birth into spiritual purity is necessary before socialism becomes possible.with here and there sweetness of service



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and unselfishness, desires for goodness, for renunciation and sacrifice, and with conscience, stern and awful, at times blazingly imperious, demanding the right, — the right, nothing more nor less than the right. (Preface)

War of the Classes begins with a critique of the theory of exclusion and demonstrates how power operators exclude the middle and working classes from their conception of "the people." Similar to the coronation of the English monarch, the United States propagates the notion that there is no class struggle. In addition, there is a lack of social cohesion, and the conflict is not merely between classes but also within them. The leaders of the working class are also no sympathisers, they generally constitute those men who “denied room for their ambition in the capitalist ranks, remain to be the leaders of the workers, to spur them to discontent, to make them conscious of their class, to lead them to revolt.” (London *War* 15) This revolt is eyewash; it deludes the workers into believing as a fight for their rights:

This revolt, appearing spontaneously all over the industrial field in the form of demands for an increased share of the joint product, is being carefully and shrewdly shaped for a political assault upon society. The leaders, with the carelessness of fatalists, do not hesitate for an instant to publish their intentions to the world. In short, they intend to destroy present-day society, which they contend is run in the interest of another class, and from the materials to construct a new society, which will be run in their interest. (15)

The capitalist class is also preparing for the conflict, and although Jack London closes with a query regarding the resolution, it is clear that, depending on which side prevails in the uprising, the situation of the working class may somewhat change. The assumption that they would all be able to split the profits and that class conflict will vanish is unrealistic. Similar to a musical chair competition, even if they leave their class, another proletarian class would eventually emerge to take its place.

London considers homeless vagrants who are unwanted and do not belong to the population that the government is in charge of in the chapter titled "The Tramp." However, how do they come into being? An analysis of the tramp experience was done in the preceding chapter. He is more overt and acerbic in his nonfiction writing. London emphasizes that they are the excess labor that has always been in the city and are not the suddenly appearing populous coming from the countryside. The short answer is that not everyone can find employment since, if technology could allow the government to accomplish its tasks for less



money, then there would be no reason to hire more people. The failure of strikes can really be attributed to this excess labor since there is always a ready supply of workers to take the place of the striking workers.

London avers:

But the last and most significant need for the surplus labor army remains to be stated. This surplus labor acts as a check upon all employed labor. It is the lash by which the masters hold the workers to their tasks, or drive them back to their tasks when they have revolted. It is the goad which forces the workers into the compulsory “free contracts” against which they now and again rebel. There is only one reason under the sun that strikes fail, and that is because there are always plenty of men to take the strikers’ places (21)

In addition to the army of surplus labor, there is another class that does not belong to either the capitalist or working class. Scabs are the group that consistently outperforms everyone else and even taints a person's reputation in the workplace. It may be a scab biting into another worker, or a large capitalist devouring a tiny one, or even a large nation swallowing up a small one. However, this is the unavoidable state of affairs in a cutthroat society. Jack London avers:

[...] And so long as men continue to live in this competitive society, struggling tooth and nail with one another for food and shelter, ... that long will the scab continue to exist. His will “to live” will force him to exist. He may be flouted and jeered by his brothers, he may be beaten with bricks and clubs by the men who by superior strength and capacity scab upon him as he scabs upon them by longer hours and smaller wages, but through it all he will persist, giving a bit more of most for least than they are giving (46-47).

Since their presence would keep working class antinomies and discontent, if any, under check, the class of scabs would continue to exist, and the capitalist class would prosper from them. At the same time, the scabs would be taken advantage of and maybe continue to be abused.

The elimination of poverty, the rejection of wage labor, and the belief that society is overlaid upon the state rather than the other way around are the three fundamental tenets of socialism. It is necessary to note that the first paradox is unachievable since its premise is founded on the idea that everyone should have equal access to chances. Eliminating poverty is akin to completely rejecting the concept of power in a society where social interactions are based on performance and adherence to labor standards. A state might



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really work to end poverty by offering incentives and generating employment possibilities. However, maintaining an equal distribution in this aspect would be equivalent to devaluing those who labor. Work may now give rise to the concept of paid labor.

Even if socialists make a lot of contrast between labor that is essential to meet individual wants and labor that is excess to the master's demands in order to create profit, it is undeniable that the pay received will eventually meet individual needs. The total elimination of wage labor would thus necessitate ownership of land, capital, and entrepreneurial skills, which is an unrealistic expectation given that humans are not capable of producing what they require in this day and age of advanced civilization. London underlines again that the issues are quite obvious and that attempts should be made toward full all-around growth rather than speculating about revolutions and strikes. The state is not a shadowy institution. It is fundamentally the society in which one lives and is made up of its citizens; in a democracy, this means that its citizens are democratically chosen by universal suffrage. To keep society's discipline and order, the state is required. They are essential components of one another rather than distinct entities. The distinction is seen in the weight given to the individual voice and how much it is taken into account when making decisions about how the state is managed.

Ultimately, it may be said that London's nonfiction represents his goals, his journey, his vision, and his acceptance of reality. London has long advocated for a revolution—possibly psychological. He examines the heinous destruction and exploitation perpetrated by the capitalist class, how it is incorrectly perceived that everything that belongs to everyone is for everyone's benefit, and how it has prevented the existence of a lovely, peaceful society. The revolutionaries have a pure and noble motivation, and they occupy a religious stance. In 1905, Londoners thought that since the working class was opposing the capitalist class, revolutions could be able to alter the course of history (Revolution). It was previously stressed that the word "class" is a huge and challenging phrase. London believes that this revolution, which started as a campaign for industrial rights, will spread to the political arena, stripping the wealthy oligarchs of all their political privileges and establishing a society based on harmony, peace, and collaboration. The early articles had a spark of revolution at first, but they progressively mature and complete London's transformation from a chaotic socialist city to one that guarantees genuine change.



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