

# Social Attitudes in Jack London's Works

Isakova Barchinoy Ne'matovna

English teacher at Fergana Academic Lyceum of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Independent researcher at Fergana State University, Uzbekistan

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes Jack London's critique of social systems through his novels *Martin Eden*, *The Call of the Wild*, and *The Sea-Wolf*. Using literary criticism, it explores themes of class struggle, individualism, and capitalist oppression. London's protagonists embody the tensions between personal ambition and systemic barriers, illustrating the harsh realities of social mobility. The study highlights how London's portrayal of survival, rebellion, and societal constraints remains relevant to contemporary discussions on social inequality and justice.

**Keywords:** Social critique, Class struggles, Capitalism, Individualism, Social systems, Class mobility, Social Darwinism, Capitalist exploitation, Human nature, Wilderness, Social inequality, Social justice.

**Introduction:** Jack London is a prominent figure in American literature, known for his works that explore the depths of human nature, survival, and the complexities of social structures. As an advocate of social reform, his works critique the capitalist system, focusing on class struggles, social injustice, and the limitations placed on individuals by these systems. London, born into poverty and having worked in various harsh conditions, drew heavily from his personal experiences to craft narratives that interrogated social systems and the human condition.

In works such as *The Call of the Wild* (1903), *Martin Eden* (1909), and *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), London explored themes of individualism, the survival of the fittest, and the rejection of societal norms. These themes, although expressed through different settings—ranging from the wilderness to the turbulent seas—reveal a consistent critique of class structures and the economic disparities that underpin capitalist societies. This paper aims to analyze how London's works reflect his views on society and human nature, particularly through the lens of class conflicts and the struggle for social mobility.

By examining key novels and protagonists, this study will explore how London critiques the social and economic systems of his time, and how his portrayals of individual struggle serve as a broader commentary on the inherent flaws within these systems. The analysis will not only delve into the characters' personal

battles but also consider the broader social forces at play, particularly the tensions between individualism and social responsibility.

## METHOD

This study conducts a focused literary analysis of Jack London's portrayal of social systems and class struggles in three of his major works: *Martin Eden*, *The Call of the Wild*, and *The Sea-Wolf*. These novels were selected for their rich exploration of London's evolving critique of capitalist structures, individualism, and the nature of survival under societal pressures.

The analysis employs close reading techniques, emphasizing narrative structure, character development, and thematic elements. Marxist theory serves as the primary critical lens, helping to uncover the class dynamics and social inequalities depicted in London's narratives. Secondary sources, including scholarly articles, critical biographies, and historical studies of the period, are used to contextualize London's writing within broader socio-economic debates of his time.

A comparative approach is applied to examine how London presents similar critiques across different environments—urban society, the wilderness, and life at sea. This comparative analysis reveals a consistent thread in London's social commentary, despite the varied settings and character types he employs. Through this method, the paper demonstrates how

London's works reflect his deep skepticism toward capitalist values and his enduring concern for social justice.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In *Martin Eden*, the protagonist's journey is emblematic of the struggle for social mobility within a capitalist system. Martin, a working-class man, seeks to climb the social ladder through his intellectual and artistic abilities. However, despite his talent, he is consistently rejected by the elite, not only due to his humble origins but also because of the rigid class structures that prioritize wealth over merit. The novel portrays the futility of the American Dream for the working class, illustrating the inherent barriers to social mobility in a capitalist society.

Eden's tragic end—his suicide after achieving literary success—highlights the psychological toll of striving within an unjust system. His death symbolizes the collapse of the individual under the weight of societal expectations, materialism, and class discrimination. In this sense, London critiques the very ideals of individualism and self-made success that the capitalist system promotes. Through Eden's story, London questions whether true self-realization is possible in a society that imposes strict class boundaries and values success over humanity.

In *The Call of the Wild*, London uses the character of Buck, a domesticated dog, to explore themes of survival and the return to a more primal state. The novel is an allegory for human society, wherein Buck's journey from a pampered pet to a fierce and independent creature of the wild parallels the way individuals are often forced to relinquish their humanity and become consumed by the competitive forces of survival within capitalist structures. In the wild, Buck finds freedom, but it comes with violence and the constant need to assert his dominance. This reflects London's belief that capitalist society strips individuals of their compassion and moral values, reducing them to mere competitors in the race for survival.

The theme of survival is also explored in *The Sea-Wolf*, where the character of Wolf Larsen embodies the philosophy of social Darwinism. Larsen's worldview, which equates survival with strength and ruthlessness, serves as a critique of the capitalist notion that the strongest and most competitive individuals should rise to the top. Larsen rejects traditional morality, seeing it as a weakness that prevents individuals from achieving greatness. Through Larsen, London critiques the dehumanizing aspects of the capitalist system, showing how the pursuit of power and dominance leads to isolation and existential despair. The novel positions

Larsen as both a symbol of capitalist oppression and a representation of the dangers of unchecked individualism.

In all three works, London emphasizes the struggle of the individual against societal norms, with varying degrees of success. While the protagonists in *The Call of the Wild* and *The Sea-Wolf* manage to break free from the confines of their respective societies, they do so at a great personal cost. In *Martin Eden*, the protagonist's tragic end underscores the futility of trying to fit into a society that is fundamentally flawed and unjust.

London's critique of social systems is rooted in his personal experiences as a worker and an activist. His background in labor movements and his awareness of the inequalities within capitalist society are evident throughout his works. In *Martin Eden*, the protagonist's fight to succeed in a capitalist world represents the broader struggle of the working class to gain recognition and equality. London's portrayal of Eden's failure is a commentary on the myth of meritocracy and the way in which social structures inherently favor the elite.

In *The Call of the Wild*, London contrasts the civilization of human society with the rawness of nature, presenting the wilderness as a place where freedom and survival are paramount. Buck's transformation symbolizes a return to a more authentic existence, free from the societal constraints imposed by capitalism. However, this freedom is not without its own challenges. London's portrayal of Buck's experience suggests that while society may be oppressive, the path to freedom is fraught with hardship and violence, a theme that is also central to his critique of capitalist individualism.

In *The Sea-Wolf*, the figure of Wolf Larsen represents the extreme end of individualism. Larsen's philosophy of survival of the fittest rejects any notion of social cooperation or moral responsibility. London critiques this viewpoint by showing how Larsen's obsession with power and self-reliance ultimately leads to his alienation and isolation. Larsen's character serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of embracing an individualistic, Darwinian worldview that ignores the importance of community and collective well-being.

London's works also reflect his belief in the potential for social change. Despite the grim realities portrayed in his novels, there is an underlying sense of hope that individuals can break free from the constraints of social systems. However, London's protagonists often achieve this freedom through rebellion or escape, highlighting the difficulty of overcoming systemic oppression. His works challenge readers to question

the fairness of the social order and the impact of capitalism on human relationships, offering a critique that remains relevant to contemporary discussions of social justice and inequality.

### **CONCLUSION**

Jack London's literary legacy is defined by his bold critiques of capitalist society and his exploration of class struggles, individualism, and the human desire for freedom. Through the protagonists in *Martin Eden*, *The Call of the Wild*, and *The Sea-Wolf*, London examines the limitations and injustices of social systems, highlighting the psychological, emotional, and physical toll these systems take on individuals. His works call into question the validity of social hierarchies and the notion of meritocracy, while also offering a powerful critique of the dehumanizing aspects of capitalism.

While London's works suggest that individuals can break free from oppressive systems, they also warn of the costs involved in such a struggle. The protagonists' journeys are marked by sacrifice, violence, and personal loss, reflecting the harsh realities of attempting to live outside the bounds of societal norms. Nevertheless, London's portrayal of resistance and resilience in the face of injustice continues to resonate with contemporary readers, making his works both timeless and highly relevant to ongoing debates about social inequality and individual freedom.

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