Jack London Essay, Research Paper

Jack London, as a writer, used Darwinian determinism, Nietzschean theories or race and adventure in his writings. Jack London was born in San Francisco and abandoned shortly after birth by his father, London took the name of his stepfather. Because of his family?s poor financial condition, London was forced to leave school at the age of fourteen and find work. He labored for several years as a cannery worker, a longshoreman and as a nocturnal scavenger of San Francisco Bay, becoming the self-styled “Prince of the Oyster Pirates.” In his spare time, he attempted to further his education by reading the works of Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, Rudyard Kipling, Friedrich Nietzche, and others. He joined the Klondike gold rush or 1898, returning to San Francisco penniless, but with a wealth of memories, which provided the raw material for his first stories. Jack London fought his way up out of the factories and waterfront dives of West Oakland to become the highest paid, most popular novelist and short story writer of his day. He wrote passionately and prolifically about the great questions of life and death, the struggle to survive with dignity and integrity, and he wove the elemental ideas into stories of high adventure based on his own writing appealed not to the few, but to millions of people all around the world.

Along with his books and stories, however, Jack London was widely known for his personal exploits. He was a celebrity, a colorful and controversial personality who was often in the news. Generally fun loving and playful, he could also be combative, and was quick to side with the underdog against injustice or oppression of any kind. He was a fiery and eloquent public speaker and much sought after as a lecturer on socialism and other economic and political topics. Despite his avowed socialism, most people considered him a living symbol of rugged individualism, a man whose fabulous success was due not to special favor of any kind, but to a combination of unusual mental ability and immense vitality.

Many people have noticed Darwinism determinism appear frequently in literary criticism of London’s works and historical analysis of his life. Darwinism is the theory referring to biologist Charles Darwin’s beliefs that the origin of species is a result of variation due to a genetic mutation from the parents, with individuals who are best adapted to survive chosen through the process of natural selection. Survival requires cooperation, which is why socialists of London’s day accepted Darwinian science as proof of the superiority of their politics. Determinism is the principle that all information and events embody natural laws. A key component of naturalist writing. London, being a naturalist, used the wide variety of readings and experiences the fed his imagination to produced the two seemingly contradictory worldviews found in his work. Adventure tales, such as ?White Fang? and ?The Sea Wolf?; reflect the doctrines of rugged individualism and of amoral ubermensch (superman), which London had learned from reading Darwin. Darwin had his greatest influence on London through the writings of Herbert Spencer. Darwin, in On the Origin of Species, wrote “the expression often used by Mr. Herbert Spencer of the ‘Survival of the Fittest’ is more accurate than ‘Struggle for Existence’, and is sometimes equally convenient.” London reasserted much the same idea in White Fang (Philosophy Darwin).

Jack London also learned from the readings of Friedrich Nietzsche. London used the term Nietzscheism which is the association to the doctrine of Friedrich Nietzsche which stresses the “will to power” as the primary motivating impetus of society and the individual. Note the character of Wolf Larsen in The Sea-Wolf. One of Jack London’s favorite books was Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathusa. In this book, Nietzsche expounded his theory of the “beyond – man” or “superman.” The “superman” was perfect in both mind and body. He was unmatched in strength and intelligence. He was also not encumbered by religious or social mores. It was the idea of the “superman” that Jack London would incorporate into many of his novels and short stories. For Jack London there were two types of “supermen.” London wrote, “I have been more stimulated by Nietzsche than by any other writer in the world.” London considered himself an admirer of Nietzsche, but also an “intellectual enemy.” London regarded both Martin Eden and The Sea Wolf as indictments against the selfish individualism of the “superman” theory. This is not to say that London disregarded the “superman” outright. Concerning his novel Burning Daylight, London wrote: “Read my Burning Daylight, in which I show a successful superman who at the end of his triumph and career, throws his thirty million dollars to the winds in order to win to a greater thing, namely love.” London would have considered himself a “socialist superman,” similar to the description above. This type of “superman,” which includes a concern for others, was influenced by London’s interest in socialism (Philosophy Nietzsche).

London?s heroes feel the tingle of life, that electric thrill with which man goes forth to combat, perchance even to pay life?s penalty. The greatest lovers of life are those who hazard it most freely, who most open-breasted brave its dangers; not those who hoard, to spend it moment by moment like precious grains of gold, but those who gamble, staking their whole upon the turn of a card? The stories of Jack London stimulate in us of America our best virtues, which, because he stimulates also our worst vices-our thoughtless, reckless, inconsequential energy, our love of a blind conflict, our man and institution-baiting, our love of change, our caprice, our so-called reform and progressiveness.