

Manifestations of Dehumanization: A Critical Study of Jack London's *Martin Eden*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the manifestations of dehumanization in Jack London's Martin Eden. This novel is a good example of economic enslavement and dehumanization of the working class. Martin Eden, the protagonist of the novel, believes that the race in life is the battle to be strong. As an individualist and intellectual moralist, he found himself face to face with the morality of the class. In his attempt to become a famous writer and earn more, Martin Eden undergoes a lot of suffering. The descriptions of such experiences are based on London's recollection of his personal life and his sufferings. From his observations and reflections on contemporary society, London brings to the fore its antagonistic nature. Often, he asserts that the source of this antagonism lies in economic disparity. Reacting to man's growing dependence on processes at work in an industrialised and commercialised society, London sharply criticises the misuse of money and machinery by the rich industrialists. He analyses the causes which dehumanize, depersonalize and ultimately alienate human beings from self and society. London's critical realism depicts the gap between the aspirations of the individual and the social conditions in which he is doomed to live, and which often bring about his physical and moral degradation.

Keywords: *Enslavement, Dehumanization, Moral, Suffering, Society, Alienation*

Introduction

Jack London is a prolific and voluminous writer of American literature. The life and work are impossible to separate completely in any examination of a writer, but they are more inextricably tangled in London, than in most authors. His viewpoint is strongly influenced by that initial struggle, to rise from the abyss of poverty and ignorance, and become a lord of high places. London fought with his background and environment. He successfully mastered the difficulties in his way through self-education. He won the battle of recognition and became famous.

London projects the dehumanizing effect arising out of the misuse of machine and money in *Martin Eden*. In the novel, the worst condition of the labourers is shown. Their poor lot has been contemptuously described as that of slaves, and their morality regarded as "slave morality." Often, they are addressed as "slaves," "stupid men," "dogs wrangling over bones" and "animals." Being penniless and on the verge of starvation, Martin Eden is forced to interrupt his writing work and seek a small job. The only work under the circumstances he can get is the job of a laundry man. Martin Eden, the ambitious young man with his plans to become a writer, is forced to work like a beast in the laundry where he is made to stand day and night and work for fourteen hours without a break. By working round the clock in a cell, he grows immune to sensitive feelings. For Martin Eden, working at the laundry "was super-machine like, and it helped to crush out the glimmering bit of soul that was all that was left him from former life" (145). Being dead tired he has no leisure for reading or playing. In fact, the mechanical rut of his daily routine makes him lose all interest in study and he feels as if he had no thoughts save for the nerve-racking, body-destroying toil. Martin Eden realizes how rapidly he is losing the energy of his mind and body on account of the "never-resting" and "beastly" existence in the laundry. London pictures his spiritlessness in these words:

He was worn and haggard, and his handsome face dropped in lean exhaustion. He puffed his cigarette spiritlessly, and his voice was peculiarly dead and monotonous. All the snap and fire had gone out of him. His triumph seemed a sorry one. (139)

Martin Eden's struggle for recognition as a writer shows the latent ambition and aspiration of an individual who tries hard to rise in life and to raise himself above his lowly social class. He is motivated to win Ruth's love and join the upper social class to which she belongs. He faces intense emotional stress and self-questioning in his search for identity. He mobilizes his energy and talent to achieve a realistic goal - to be counted among the major writers of the day, and after achieving his objective he intends to marry his beloved Ruth and lead a happy married life. But, the "loathed" and beastly existence at the laundry disillusioned him. His audacities of phrase struck him as grotesque, his felicities of expression were monstrosities, and everything was absurd, unreal and impossible. Having lost the zest for a purposeless life, Martin Eden finds himself as a "chartless" and "rudderless" boat.

In the degradation of Martin Eden, London has brilliantly shown the depersonalization and dehumanization of an idealistic and ambitious young man. The

oppressive “machine” and “money” retard his intellectual mobility rapidly. Having experienced failures in the pursuit of his ideals, Martin Eden inevitably becomes “an intellectual moralist defeated by class morality which is essentially an economic morality” (N.E. Dunn’s “The Significance of Upward Mobility in *Martin Eden*,” 6). His self-confidence, faith and desire for a sincere and honest living are shaken to the roots by Ruth’s betrayal in love, Martin Eden finds himself overpowered by depressive feelings of self-hatred and self-condemnation. Evidently, the process of dehumanization has begun in him, and London describes it thus:

He was self-repelled as though he had undergone some degradation or was intrinsically foul. All that was God-like in him was blotted out. The spur of ambition was blunted; he had no vitality with which to feel the prod of it. He was dead. His soul seemed dead. He was a beast, a work beast. He saw no beauty in the sunshine sifting down through the green leaves, nor did the azure vault of the sky whisper as of old and hint of cosmic vastness and secret trembling to disclosure. Life was intolerably dull and stupid, and its taste was bad in his mouth. A black screen was drawn across his mirror of inner vision, and fancy lay in a darkened sick-room where entered no ray of light. (141)

London, here, metaphorically suggests how the inner impulses of Martin Eden are completely deadened by his beastly existence as a slave of the machine and betrayal in love by Ruth Morse - the representative of the bourgeois. His “inner vision” becomes inert and indifferent, and he finds no charm in external objects of beauty, sunshine, and gaiety.

London projects the dehumanizing effect of machine and money on an idealistic and ambitious young man, Martin Eden. London depicts through the characterization of Martin Eden, how desperation arising out of acute economic disparities is the main cause of man’s inevitable conversion to a cog in a machine in a capitalistic society. It is to be noted that London is not hostile to the machine, but to the exploitative practices of the capitalistic system. London’s social perceptiveness depicts complexities of the industrial society and a deepening concern for the working class which becomes a victim to its malpractices of amassing wealth. His repudiation of the industrial society is more concerned with his will to persuade people to think that acquisitive capitalism is not in keeping with its democratic traditions. So, London takes every chance to condemn the capitalism and giant monopolies which cause threat to the humane existence of the workers whose wages they could control in an oversupplied labour market. As a result of the ruthless and dishonest mechanisation by the captains of industry, the wage-labourers were dehumanized physically and mentally, and they committed suicide like Martin Eden.

Martin Eden is London’s most effective presentation of the disturbed mental state which arises out of the internal conflicts of an idealistic young man. Martin Eden is disillusioned when his blessed idealism “to become a writer” and his sincere love for his only beloved Ruth are blighted by the hypocrisy of the upper class. His individualism faces a direct confrontation with the acquisitiveness of the bourgeois. The crisis deepens in Martin Eden’s psychic self when his intellectual individualism fails him. The harder he works on his

ambitious venture to become a writer, the larger becomes the number of his rejected manuscripts which he receives back “with regret slips” from the various publishers. He is extremely disappointed to find nepotism prevailing in the noble career of writing, and the bitter experience brings in him strange confusions and conflicting feelings. What pains him the most is that he is an abler writer than many others in the field, yet no publisher even cares to read his writings. Time and again he anchors his faith in becoming a writer and hopes against hope to receive at least one cheering line from the publishers. Such an act on his part reflects his wishful thinking, and London describes it thus;

Ho matter if my work is unusual, no matter if it is unfit, for prudential reasons, for their pages, surely there must be some sparks in it, somewhere, a few, to warm them to some sort of appreciation. And, there upon he would get out one or another of his manuscripts, such as “Adventure,” and read it over and over in a vain attempt to vindicate the editorial silence. (230)

But Martin Eden’s self-consolation does not last long. He feels belittled at the hands of the publishers when to them “he wrote again and again,” begging, entreating, threatening, but his letters were ignored” (230). A few of his poems, accepted for publication to his great surprise, are “slaughtered” by the editors; in some cases, even the titles of the poems are altered. It is too much for Martin Eden to bear a grievous mutilation of his noble writings. His confidence is shaken and he grows timid mentally and morally. When his friend, Brissendom, shows him the real dirt that exists in the appalling poverty of hoboes, slum-dwellers and orphans, he feels as if his idealism has “led him to philosophic anarchy ... and his Spencerianism is turned to materialistic monism” (285).

The crisis of self in Martin Eden deepens when he, in addition to failing as a writer, is also betrayed in love by Ruth. He has always held Ruth in high esteem, and considers her as his only treasure in the materialistic world which has brutally shattered his dreams and ideals. Martin Eden’s is “essentially a love-nature .and he possessed more than the average man’s need for sympathy” (204). In Ruth’s loving company, he forgets his misery, sorrow and failure as a writer. He often talks to her for hours together, pours out his heart to her, extremely happy when she favourably responds to his love. He considers himself on top of the world when she feels a “swoon of daelight” and “the heart of her, the woman other, concerned with life itself, exulted triumphantly” (207) in his company. In some moments of paradisaical ecstasy experienced by him in the company of his sweetheart Ruth, he confidently tells her the definition of true love: “All things may go astray in this world, hut not love. Love cannot go wrong unless it be a weakling that faints and stumbles by the way” (251). But the sky soon changes for Martin Eden when in spite of his sincere and ideal love for her, Ruth betrays him. At a dinner in the house of Morses, he falls a prey to the strategy of the parents of Ruth, who have planned to bring him down in the eyes of Ruth. The Morses family, in the bourgeois convention, is strongly opposed to Ruth’s intention to marry Martin Eden who has neither social status nor upper-class upbringing. Martin Eden’s outspoken and sincere nature is provoked by a discussion on the “henidical” and “dishonest” practices carried out by the bourgeois. He charges Judge Blount, present at the dinner, indulging in exploitative practices

and favouring the “intellectual pretence, and the fraud of those who sat in high places” (298). Martin Eden’s pungent comments fall upon Judge Blount as a thunderbolt and he glares at Martin Eden with apoplectic countenance. Ruth’s parents are happy that their daughter is shocked to see the indecent behaviour of Martin Eden. Their plans bear the desired result: “It was what wanted to do - to bring out the innate ruffianism of this man they did not like” (298).

Ruth is horrified at Martin Eden’s misbehaviour with Judge Blount whom she considered a man of power and achievement. She tells him bluntly: “There are certain bounds of decency and you had no licence to insult anybody” (300). Ruth’s reaction is unbearable for Martin Eden and he feels small in the presence of those who sat in the high places, who lived in fine houses and had educations and bank accounts. Martin Eden finds himself as a miserable and restless creature in a society which has no conscience» His restlessness increases further on receiving Ruth’s letter conveying her inability to marry him. She tells him her parent’s unwillingness for their marriage mainly because he has not settled down to some position and attempted “to make something of yourself” (311).

Ruth’s betrayal in love at a critical time when Martin Eden is emotionally involved in her love is a severe setback to his normal existence. Ruth’s refusal to marry him against the wishes of her parents is just a reflection of the conventional bourgeois morality which Martin Eden dislikes so much. It is a premonition of disaster. He realizes the difference between the social position enjoyed by the Morses and the pauperism in which he has been existing. The words uttered by the Morses on his small ‘position’ in society resound in his mind again and again. He remembers how the parents of Ruth have convinced their daughter by telling her that:

Martin has nothing but roughness to offer you in exchange for all that is refined, and delicate in you. He is no match for you in any way. He could not support you. We have no foolish ideas about wealth, but comfort is another matter, and our daughter should at least marry a man who can give her that - and not a penniless adventurer, a sailor, a cowboy, a smuggler and Heaven knows what else, who, in addition to everything, is half-brained and irresponsible. (169-70)

On hearing such a retort from her parents, the weak-willed Ruth changes her mind without caring for the consequence of her action on Martin Eden. And it is here that Martin Eden feels defeated by the economic morality of the bourgeois class. He is completely disillusioned and a sense of self-hatred is aroused in his sub-conscious. The conflict in Martin Eden’s mind has been aptly stated by Robert E. Spiller; “When he discovered the bourgeois conventionality, dishonesty, and materialism that he had mistaken for ideality in her and her set, he rejected both illusions, and with them the dying literary code of ideality” (*Literary History of The United States*, 1035). By now, a deep sense of depression has descended on the mind of Martin Eden. He feels as if he has fallen “from the height where he had been up-borne all day on the wings of inspiration. He sees his own pathetic figure before him. He finds himself in an agony of apprehension.

London shows how an inferior position engenders disaster, guilt and restlessness in the mind of Martin Eden, and he is puzzled by the bewildering minutiae of eating-implements, tortured by the ogre of a servant, striving at a leap to live at such dizzy social altitude, and deciding in the end to be frankly himself, pretending no knowledge and no polish he did not possess. When Martin Eden is involved in such a mood of utter dejection he hears the news of his only sincere friend Brissenden's committing suicide over his failure as a writer. The tragedy shakes Martin Eden very deeply, and London projects it thus;

The cessation from writing and studying, the death of Brissenden, and the estrangement from Ruth had made a big hole in his life; and his life refused to be pinned down to good living in cafe's and the smoking of Egyptian cigarettes. (327)

To Martin Eden life appears to be a "blunder and a shame." He finds himself chartless and rudderless, and he had no port to make, while drifting involved the least living, and it was living that hurt. Evidently, the circumstances are reasonably well piled up for his alienation. The main cause of ossification is quite clear in his case. He has fallen a prey to an oppressing material force and it has a deep-rooted effect on his psychic self. That is why he does not compromise with his success which he gets later on as a recognised writer. He hates the money now being showered upon him because he remembered that all these manuscripts had been refused by the very magazines that were now clamouring for them. And their refusal had been cold-blooded, automatic, stereotyped. How when Ruth comes to him, makes a humble proposal of marriage, and requests him to forgive her for the past mistakes, Martin Eden turns a deaf ear to all her entreaties and rejects her offer. He is not stirred by the feelings and gestures expressed by Ruth, because he knows well that now it is only for his money and recognition that she wants to marry him. Both mentally and physically, he remains untouched, apathetic and cold to her. He is devoid of any interest or desire for anything in life.

In this way Martin Eden heads towards complete alienation from himself, from the bourgeois society, and the love which betrayed him. Unable to reconcile himself to the evils of grossly materialistic forces, Martin Eden at last plunges into the darkness and "ceases to know" by his successful suicidal attempt. Thus, his alienation is complete and thorough.

Conclusion

Martin Eden reflects London's intention to show that the problems of dehumanization and alienation are an outcome of unrestricted capitalism. This reveals the impact of the social crisis on his thinking. The realization of man's beastly existence owes much to London's early childhood experiences when he worked at a machine - "the hell hole" for thirty-six hours at a stretch, and could not escape the "deadening toil" which completely shook his faith in life. Evidently, the manifestations of dehumanization and alienation in the character of Martin Eden show London's indictment of capitalistic society, which degrades the poor, creates industrial slavery, and ultimately compels the weak-willed individuals to dissociate themselves from the constricting forces of acquisitive society. Ultimately, the depression which has dawned on human's mind led him to a state of dehumanization.

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