

Summer 8-2017

“Some Cosmic Secret”: The Speculative Fiction of Jack London

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“SOME COSMIC SECRET”: THE SPECULATIVE FICTION OF JACK LONDON

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2017

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Throughout his career, Jack London composed many significant and influential works of literature, but his contributions to the speculative fiction genre have rarely been addressed in any sort of comprehensive critical manner. London employed his strengths as a socialist and naturalist, as well as his attitudes on the cultural issues of his time, to craft speculative fiction that was often rich with allegorical, dystopian situations in which mankind is required to consider the repercussions, both physical and psychological, of its choices and beliefs.

The first chapter will supply the necessary historical and biographical context behind London’s speculative fiction and offer an overview of his inspirations, which include the technological and scientific advancements of his time, the social and class difficulties brought on by the Gilded Age, and the work of writers like Joseph Conrad and Edward Bellamy. Chapters Two and Three will thoroughly analyze London’s SF tales, separately focusing on works that address London’s treatment of religion and the science of the Gilded Age and his views on race, imperialism, and socialism. Chapter Four will consist of an ecocritical analysis of London’s speculative fiction, and the dissertation’s conclusion will focus on the modern SF writers who were influenced by London’s work, as well as the legacy that it left.

The aim of this dissertation is to illuminate the way London’s speculative fiction nudged the SF genre into new literary terrain, a world that addressed fantastical themes and situations but did so in a more naturalistic, consequential manner—a world in which there was typically more at stake than there ever had been before.

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INTRODUCTION

In the 2014 television miniseries *Klondike*, Jack London appears as a fringe character—scruffy-looking, rakish, wryly and poetically commenting on the action, constantly nursing a glass of whiskey and fretting over his pet Siberian Husky. His depiction on this program is no doubt similar to the way he is perceived by the general public: as a naturalist and adventurer foremost, and then as that well-known literary chronicler of the frozen northland and author of such popular tales as *White Fang* and *The Call of the Wild*. What remains largely forgotten and little-known about London the author is his prolific, vital speculative fiction catalog, which extends all the way back to his first years as a published writer. London was one of the most innovative and influential speculative fiction writers of the early 20th century, and yet his speculative fiction output is rarely addressed or acknowledged, even by serious scholars of his work.

Jack London's first published work of fiction, "A Thousand Deaths" (1899), was a speculative fiction tale. One of his final short stories, "The Red One," published posthumously in 1918, was a speculative fiction tale. Novels like *Before Adam* (1907) and *The Iron Heel* (1908), and short stories like "A Relic of the Pliocene" (1901) and "A Curious Fragment" (1908) were works of speculative fiction that received acclaim during London's lifetime. His output inside the speculative genre was relatively small, particularly when compared to his nonfiction works and adventure tales, but it was significant. The work of noted science fiction authors like George Orwell, and hallmarks of science fiction stories like the dystopian society, can be connected to the worlds that were shaped and the ideas that were spawned by Jack London's speculative fiction. Even the work of literature that first introduced the term "robot" to science fiction, Karel Capek's 1920 Czech play "R.U.R.," displays clear examples of inspiration from

London's speculative fiction. Yet London's importance to and influence on this genre have rarely been dealt with in any substantial critical manner. In "*The Iron Heel* at 100: Jack London—The Artist as 'Antenna of the Race'" (2008), Jonah Raskin forcefully states that "surely a novelist with that much imagination and prescience deserves more attention from literary scholars than he has so far received" (Raskin n.p.). There is no doubt that the depth of London's legacy needs to be explored, and his name needs to be situated firmly among speculative fiction's most prominent progenitors.

As a literary genre, speculative fiction has existed virtually as long as the written word itself. Lucian's *True History*, composed in the 2nd century, offers tales of aliens and interplanetary war. Speculative fiction as allegory and/or social commentary has existed for at least as long as the publication of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* in 1726. It was in the mid- to late-19th century, however, that speculative fiction emerged as a form of literature that was not only popular but potent; fantastic works like Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) achieved notoriety and resonated with readers because of what John Clute and David Ketterer, in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (2016), called "the mocking of verisimilitude . . . entirely consistent with an overriding conviction that the phenomenal world is [magic], and that stories are veils to be pierced" (Clute n.p.). Writers like Jules Verne and H.G. Wells pushed the genre of speculative fiction further along, taking advantage of the abiding public interest in technological advancements, both legitimate and otherwise, to craft works like *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864) and *The War of the Worlds* (1897). It is from this era that the speculative fiction of Jack London emerged.

The prevailing themes of London's speculative tales are not typically those that result in pleasantly escapist reading. Dystopian societies abound, along with examples of science gone

awry. His characters are dark and hateful in their attitudes, their prejudices, and their views of the human race, and their quests usually end tragically—sometimes apocalyptically.

Emboldened by the genre in which he established his characters and their situations, London wrote critically of the social, scientific, and spiritual beliefs and fads of his day, and chronicled the perils of intransigence and nostalgia, stressing through his writing the importance of adapting, accepting new ideas, and pressing ever forward. This dissertation will state a case for Jack London as an essential voice in the speculative fiction genre: a voice that was able to draw inspiration from a unique background in naturalism to craft socially and culturally germane tales and parables that helped lay the groundwork for a great deal of the significant speculative fiction that saw print at the beginning of the twentieth century, and a voice that was crucial in establishing the blueprint for the socially aware, dystopian stories that dominate the field today. London concerned himself less with fanciful world building or whimsy and took a more realistic approach, creating characters who were products of the Gilded Age—characters who frequently had their heads buried in the sand so as to avoid being made aware of society's ills; characters who hid unseemly secrets beneath flashy veneers; and characters who behaved selfishly without apology. He then turned these characters loose inside futuristic, sometimes dystopian scenarios, where they failed at adhering to purported Gilded Age sentiments like balancing faith and reason, achieving racial harmony, and coexisting peacefully with the natural world. In his short story "The Red One," London describes an otherworldly, spherical object, nestled deeply in the Pacific jungle, emitting "deadly whispers of wrath and . . . delight, striving still to be heard, to convey some cosmic secret . . . of infinite import and value" ("The Red One" 265). The best of London's speculative fiction contained that same sense of desperate striving, that same deep need to impart ideas and viewpoints about the Gilded Age that had previously remained buried

or ignored. His speculative fiction strove to uncover the flaws that crouched around the heart of this purportedly enlightened time, and to articulate the fact that exciting new settings and extraordinary situations mean little if they are still populated by the same people, making the same mistakes. The remorseless, unyielding predicaments that ensnare the characters in London's SF stories were typically the results of their own prejudices; their biased, exploitative mindsets are fueled not only by ethnocentrism, and by the short-sightedness of the Gilded Age, but by anthropocentrism. London's contributions to speculative fiction, relatively small though they might have been, were essential in shaping the genre's landscape and establishing and expanding its possibilities, and hugely influential on the speculative fiction, fantasy, and science fiction that came after. The SF tales he told did more than just provide escapism. They revealed cosmic secrets.

Prior to delving into an explication of Jack London's influences, attitudes, and specific impact on the speculative fiction genre, it is useful to offer a summary of his significant speculative works, which I will discuss in more detail in the ensuing chapters. "A Thousand Deaths," his debut in the genre, is the first person tale of a nameless seafarer who unwittingly ends up the pawn in his malevolent father's plans to discover the key to eternal life through repeatedly executing and resurrecting him via scientific means. "The Rejuvenation of Major Rathbone," another short, first-person narrative published in 1899, deals farcically with similar themes, as the narrator and his accomplice, Dover Wallingford, use the latter's elderly uncle as a guinea pig in their experiments in revivification, only to be surprised by his affinity for his younger, spryer, more energetic incarnation.

"A Relic of the Pliocene" (1901) is a Klondike tale, told at the edge of a campfire by Thomas Stevens, a recurring character in London's Northland stories. As the story's narrator

listens with increasing incredulity, Stevens describes his recent grueling battle with a woolly mammoth. In “The Shadow and the Flash” (1903), two rival scientists named Paul and Lloyd compete to see which one of them can be the first to perfect the formula for absolute invisibility; the narrator, a mutual friend, regards their competition in mounting horror as they grow ever more desperate in their desire to best the other.

“Planchette” (1906) tells the tragic story of two young lovers, the impressionable Lute and the more skeptical Chris, who participate in a séance led by the mysterious Mrs. Grantly. Meant initially as a lighthearted party activity, the séance takes on a sinister pallor, and Chris’s dismissive reaction to it becomes a source of much consternation for Lute. Their love story comes to its end during a fateful horseback ride near the edge of a cliff, as notions like destiny, trickery, and the afterlife are discussed.

In London’s novel *Before Adam* (1907), the narrator relates his past existence as Big Tooth, a good-natured, relatively simple-minded member of a prehistoric, Neanderthal tribe known as the Cave People (or, as they prefer to call themselves, the Folk). The Cave People attempt only to survive, and to coexist peacefully with the Tree People and the Fire People, but it is not to be. Partly thanks to the efforts of Red Eye, a lecherous, murderous aberration, the Cave People find themselves displaced, helpless, and under attack by their more naturally aggressive neighbors.

The Iron Heel (1908), perhaps London’s most well-known foray into the genre of speculative fiction, details the dystopian adventures of Avis and Ernest Everhard, a pair of married freedom fighters in the 1920’s who repeatedly attempt to lead a socialist revolt against the oppressive oligarchy that controls the land. Their ill-fated tale is told by Anthony Meredith, who narrates their cautionary tale from several hundred years in the future. The novella

“Goliath,” released that same year, describes what could be considered a slightly more benevolent dystopia, as the menacing but well-meaning title character essentially *forces* a socialist society upon the world by eliminating the military and demanding the extinction of all jobs. The short story “A Curious Fragment” (1908) is set in yet another dystopian futuristic society, this one ruled by the Vanderwaters, a family of cotton barons; it is the tale of Roger Vanderwater’s redemption and attempt to set things right in his society after years of class oppression and mistreatment.

London’s speculative output drifted away from social allegory around 1910, with the publication of “When the World Was Young,” an especially vivid short story about a San Francisco banker named Thomas Ward, who leads a secret nighttime existence as a hairy, animalistic wild man, prowling the forests and making meals of animals. “The Unparalleled Invasion” (1910), meanwhile, is a fantasy that imagines a world in which China is the dominant superpower, and the Chinese are an irredeemably evil people who must be wiped off the face of the planet.

“The Strength of the Strong” (1911) is a parable about a prehistoric society comprised of Meat-Eaters and Fish-Eaters; the tale’s narrator, Long Beard, forlornly recounts the damage that befell his primitive civilization when corrupt rulers like Big-Fat, Split-Nose, and the Bug came into power and began establishing rules, money, and class systems. “The Scarlet Plague” (1912) is another melancholy, self-pitying narrative told after civilization’s collapse. Granser, the story’s main character, is a former college professor, reduced to wandering around in a plague-ravaged wasteland; eager to pass on his legacy, he seeks out a group of children and tries to tell them the tale of his life, but they mostly respond with mockery and disgust. The more Granser

bleats and whines about his existence, the more obvious it becomes that he is not as pitiable a character as might initially have been assumed.

Darrell Standing, the main character of *The Star Rover* (1915), is another individual deserving of less sympathy than he believes. An academic, imprisoned for murder, Standing is uniquely punished by being outfitted with a constricting device dubbed “the jacket,” and he escapes his suffering by mentally willing himself back into his past lives. In his sundry incarnations, Standing spends time with Pontius Pilate in the Biblical Middle East and among settlers in the American West, and is thus able to avoid both the pain and the implications that accompany his actions in the present. This storytelling structure allows London to comment on the prison system, the idea of reincarnation, and man’s own accountability.

“The Eternity of Forms” (1916) is a ghost story, told by a nameless man who has murdered his brother and is then haunted by his spirit. What differentiates this tale from many other, similar ghost stories is how unnervingly *passive* the main character’s ghostly brother is. The ghost does more psychological damage to his brother simply by appearing in the same room with him—by simply *being*—than Marley’s ghost did to Ebenezer Scrooge by rattling chains and intoning dire threats.

“The Red One” (1918), published posthumously, is the story of Bassett, an alleged lepidopterist who journeys into the Guadalcanal jungle and stumbles across a bizarre red sphere that emits an otherworldly pealing sound, and that the indigenous jungle people view as some sort of sacred object. Bassett grows obsessed with “the red one” and ingratiates himself with the members of the jungle tribe in order to become close to it. Bassett’s selfish, interloping desire to learn the secrets of the red one coexists with his intense, sickeningly racist hatred of the jungle natives, whom he regards in no uncertain terms as the most repulsive type of creatures

imaginable. Bassett ultimately sees the error of his ways; unfortunately for him, though, it is already far, far too late.

Jack London conceived and created these works of speculative fiction during the era known as the Gilded Age—that approximately thirty-year timespan that closed out the nineteenth century and ushered in the twentieth. Mark Twain coined the phrase “The Gilded Age” in his eponymous 1873 novel; the term was meant as a tongue-in-cheek reference to the era’s tendency to conceal its many social and political ills behind the veneer of opulence and prosperity. It was a time of historic creativity, with technological, scientific, medical, and cultural advancements aplenty. As detailed at length in James L. Haley’s *Wolf: The Lives of Jack London* (2010), Jonathan Auerbach’s *Male Call: Becoming Jack London* (1996), and other sources, London made note of all these advancements, kept up with the reactionary speculative fiction that saw print at this time, and crafted his own contributions to the genre. Works like *The Iron Heel* and “The Red One” were every bit as effective from a storytelling perspective as anything by H.G. Wells or Rudyard Kipling, but London identified speculative fiction as a form of writing inside which he could present socialist parables about the dangers of blind capitalism and tyrannical oligarchies, and construct alternate worlds in which the oppression of the working class has resulted in catastrophe. A writer whose impassioned socialist beliefs were noticeable in most all of his writing—the fiction and the non-fiction, the public and the private—London recognized speculative fiction as a genre that he could employ in a cautionary manner. He created worlds that he could use as examples of what might happen if class oppression and corrupt capitalism remained unchecked. As sources like those compiled in *Rereading Jack London* (1996) and Jeanne Campbell Reesman’s *Jack London’s Racial Lives: A Critical Biography* (2011) emphasize, London’s speculative fiction tales tended to resonate strongly with readers of the era,

who could recognize themselves and their situations in his stories and thus experienced a deeper level of engagement with them than they did with something like, say, *Edison's Conquest of Mars*.

In the modern college literature classroom, the name Jack London tends to evoke two themes: aggressive socialism and adventurous naturalism. A significant amount of his writing deals with one or both of those ideas. Much of his work illuminated America's frontier spirit and chronicled adventures, both real and fictional, in the frozen North and the Pacific islands, while also shining a light on America's corrupt soul, detailing the stark class divide and shameful working conditions that kept so much of the populace from achieving any of that success that they so yearned for. What made London's speculative fiction so noteworthy was the fact that his writing in this genre allowed him to continue his work with both these themes, and to bring it to a hypothetical conclusion. He could present, in a piece like *The Iron Heel*, "Goliath," or *Before Adam*, what a society ruled by oppression, corruption, misinformation, and abuse of the environment might finally look like. In his speculative fiction, London could address pertinent social and scientific issues and worker's rights with a fire and fearlessness that his more straightforward fiction or non-fiction sometimes lacked.

London's speculative fiction considered timely issues of science, medicine, and race, molding them into sometimes deteriorationist allegories in which mankind is forced to confront the results of its choices and beliefs. His distinctive brand of unsentimental naturalism had allowed him to make a name for himself as a literary realist, but that same brand of storytelling, when applied to the speculative fiction genre, advanced that genre in intriguing ways. London's speculative fiction was typically as fearless as his adventure fiction or his non-fiction travel essays, and usually concluded with similar austere finality.

The dissertation's first chapter, "'The Onslaught of the Unknown': The Social and Scientific Influences on Jack London's Speculative Fiction," will answer the question of inspiration; it will focus on the influences that enabled London to work in the speculative fiction genre, and to formulate these speculative ideas in his head. In *Male Call: Becoming Jack London*, Auerbach states the case that London entered the speculative fiction universe for two reasons: to craft more commercial, potentially financially lucrative fiction; and to get his sociological points across in a faster, fiercer, sharper manner. Speculative works like Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888) and Edwin Abbott's *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (1884) were popular at the time; London noted how they blended fantastical storytelling with cogent socialist themes. Writers whom London admired deeply, like Rudyard Kipling and Joseph Conrad (and even Ambrose Bierce, a writer whom London did not admire deeply, to say the least) were turning towards speculative fiction and coming up with masterpieces. The time was right for London to invade the genre and make it his own, which he did with all of his zeal for socialism and activism intact. Indeed, as my first chapter will illustrate, London's speculative fiction often concluded with bleak, poetic codas that underlined the stories' socialist themes, setting them apart from his more realistic tales, which were constrained by their own genre requirements and were typically more conventional all around.

The inspirations for Jack London's speculative fiction abounded in the late 1800's and early 1900's, from writers like Conrad, Kipling, Bellamy, and Abbott, to the fads, ideas, and experiments brought on by the Gilded Age, itself. My first chapter will explore those inspirations and provide a brief history of the speculative fiction genre before London made himself a part of it with the publication of "A Thousand Deaths." The second chapter, "'What

Shall I Be When I Live Again?': Faith and Reason in Jack London's Speculative Fiction," will begin to consider the impact that his speculative fiction made on the literary world.

The majority of those who have written about Jack London's speculative fiction, from Earle Labor in *Jack London: An American Life* (2013) to those whose work is compiled in *Jack London's Racial Lives: A Critical Biography*, cite London's devout socialism and activist sensibility as a significant source of the impassioned tenor behind cautionary parables like "Planchette," "The Shadow and the Flash," and "Goliath." His emergence at a key historical moment, just as the dwindling years of the Gilded Age blended into the burgeoning twentieth century (and all the technological, societal, and spiritual advancements that it promised) is also vital in understanding his value in the genre. London lived an unconventional life; he was largely self-educated, perpetually curious, and intrigued not only by what he read by the likes of Charles Darwin and his contemporaries, but also by how society as a whole reacted to it.

At times, it seemed as though London's view of society was a harsh one. In *The People of the Abyss* (1903), he describes people as "stupid and heavy, without imagination," adding that "the Abyss seems to exude a stupefying atmosphere of torpor, which wraps about them and deadens them. Religion passes them by. The Unseen holds for them neither terror nor delight" (43-44). Despite the cynicism evident in these words, and despite the bleak portraits of humanity that are presented in much of his speculative fiction, from *The Iron Heel* to *Before Adam*, London maintained a level of hopefulness—perhaps even optimism—for the future of the human race. In his moving introduction to *The Cry for Justice: An Anthology of the Literature of Social Protest* (1915), edited by Upton Sinclair, London wrote of his faith that people "will serve truth to confute liars and make of them truth-tellers; will serve kindness so that brutality will perish; will serve beauty to the erasement of all that is not beautiful," resulting in a "new and higher

civilization that will exposit itself in terms of love and service and brotherhood” (Introduction i). His view of the human race could be characterized as sternly optimistic; he believed that, when pressed, people would do the right thing, but he was quick to lament and chastisement when they did falter.

My second chapter will elucidate London’s tendency, in his speculative fiction, to advocate the importance of inductive reasoning and adapting to new ideas; many of his stories, like “Planchette,” “The Eternity of Forms,” and “The Scarlet Plague,” dealt with characters who refused to do this, and coldly chronicled the death, despair, and destruction that resulted. London’s own views on religion and spirituality were conflicted, but his views on the dangers of blind faith were unmistakable, and disdainful. In Edgar Rice Burroughs’s *A Princess of Mars*, originally serialized in 1912, the character of John Carter is seemingly transported into the futuristic Martian environment through sheer force of will; it is as if he wishes himself onto another world. By contrast, in London’s *The Star Rover* (1915), the character of Darrell Standing literally retreats into the past in an attempt to escape his life on Death Row and avoid paying for the consequences of his actions in the present. In this way, he represents London’s critical view of mankind’s prevailing need to retreat in moments of change or opportunity—to run from the new. Texts like Reesman’s *Jack London’s Racial Lives*, as well as *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Jack London*, co-edited by Reesman and Kenneth K. Brandt, Lawrence Berkove’s “The Myth of Hope in Jack London’s ‘The Red One’” (1996), Donna Campbell’s “‘Have you Read my Christ Story?’: Mary Austin’s *The Man Jesus* and London’s *The Star Rover*” (2012), and other scholarly works examine the contrast and the collision between spirituality, religion, and rationality in London’s speculative work. London once referred to metaphysics as “the name for that mode of thought that reasons from theory to fact,” adding “my

mode of thought, [and] the mode of thought of positive science, is to reason from fact to theory” (*Letters* 721). The second chapter of this dissertation will trace the depiction of that mode of thought in London’s speculative fiction, and articulate its importance.

Above all, of course, Jack London’s speculative fiction is deserving of further consideration and a higher place in the lexicon because of its quality: most of London’s genre tales are fast-paced, engaging, provocative, and even occasionally horrifying. However, as has been documented on numerous occasions, when it comes to Jack London’s literary oeuvre, “you have to take the rough (the repulsive philosophizing) with the smooth (the exhilarating adventuring)” (Robinson n.p.). Thus, the dissertation’s third chapter, “‘Men Who Are Slaves are Not Strong’: Racism and Imperialism in Jack London’s Speculative Fiction,” will address the indisputably rancorous racist attitudes that often appeared in London’s writing, both fictional and non-fictional.

Throughout his literary career, Jack London referred to Asians dismissively as “yellow men,” Pacific islanders as “little brown men,” and described indigenous races in abhorrent terms. London’s many pieces about the boxer Jack Johnson typically thread a fine line between admiration and vile racism, as London praises Johnson’s skills in the ring while also calling him a “playful Ethiopian” and wondering which “great white hope” might eventually vanquish him (“Jack London Describes the Fight” n.p.). “The Red One” is one of his most potent speculative tales, but it is also one of his most offensive, as London frequently halts his narrative to spare no detail in describing the physical characteristics of the island tribe that his main character encounters. The racist, imperialist, xenophobic language in much of London’s writing is something that must be addressed by all those who consider the author’s legacy. It appears

prominently, and indefensibly, in much of his speculative fiction, though it often carries with it an undercurrent of anguish and self-loathing.

There are some writers—particularly his widow Charmian—who have attempted over the years to justify and contextualize Jack London’s racism. The primary stance they take is that racist and eugenic thought was, regrettably, not all that uncommon during the early twentieth century. Significant texts like Isiah Lavender’s *Race in American Science Fiction* (2011) and R. John Williams’s *The Buddha in the Machine: Art, Technology, and the Meeting of East and West* (2014) more cogently analyze the racism that London and many of his literary peers tended to display. These texts acknowledge the visible struggle with racist thought inherent in much of London’s work. The main characters in short stories like “The Scarlet Plague,” “The Strength of the Strong,” and “The Red One” behave with hatefulness towards those of other races but often seem to do so in a self-aware, self-loathing manner. In the end, it seemed as though the characters in much of London’s speculative fiction, aware of their racism but unwilling to work towards understanding or overcoming it, ultimately suffered for those beliefs. London’s widow, Charmian, and his daughter, Joan, both argued that Jack’s own final years were spent amid a very similar anguish. My third chapter will connect that racism with that anguish, and will provide relevant examples of the hateful prejudices at work in London’s speculative fiction and the consequences that those prejudices created.

Indeed, the theme that dominated the most in London’s career output was that Man, when pitted against Nature, will *never* triumph. His short story “To Build a Fire” (1902) dealt expressly with that theme, and it occurred in much of his speculative fiction, as well. It is a theme that lends itself perfectly to an ecocritical analysis. The dissertation’s fourth chapter, “‘It Was Not a Happy Abiding-Place’: The Ecocritical Worlds of Jack London’s Speculative

Fiction,” will turn towards an explication of why ecocriticism is the ideal form of literary criticism with which to explore London’s speculative fiction. London is viewed, and viewed himself, as among the most naturalistic and environmentally aware writers of his time. “I have expressed much of my heart toward the land,” he once wrote to a colleague, and much of London’s work was prescient in its denunciations of those who would misuse the natural world (*Letters* 1590). In *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology, and the Environment* (2003), Glen Love goes so far as to dub London the “supreme ecologist” (Love 53). As detailed in Caroline Hanssen’s “‘You Were Right, Old Hoss; You Were Right’: Jack London in Jon Krakauer’s *Into the Wild*” (2011), the infamous Christopher McCandless is said to have inscribed, rather fatuously, the words “Jack London is King” into a tree during his fateful Alaskan journey, though one wonders how dedicated McCandless was to London’s work to presume that an ill-prepared amble into the northern wilderness was something of which the author would ever have approved (Hanssen 191). The fourth chapter will consider London’s treatment of nature in his SF and how it contributes to an ecocritical reading of his speculative writing.

When regarded alongside one of London’s nonfiction pieces like *The Cruise of the Snark*, with its almost journalistically precise description of a trip across the Pacific Ocean, a work of speculative fiction like *The Star Rover* is comparatively untethered, even whimsical. There is no doubt that Jack London is one of the greatest literary chroniclers of place to have emerged in the early twentieth century, but in his speculative fiction, he could become hypothetical, metaphorical, and parabolic; he could transpose his acute sense of place and description to worlds that did not exist, or worlds that only existed as cautionary examples of what might happen if man’s disrespect of nature continued unabated. Although he remained a humanist,

London eschewed the idea of speculative utopias in his writing. His speculative fiction dealt more with dystopian places and societies, where the notion of man and nature coexisting harmoniously was regarded dismissively, and where vivid descriptions of ecosystems and environments scarred by war, abuse, and inhumanity were presented as warnings. In *The Iron Heel*, Anthony Meredith, the narrator of the story, says that “the utterance of a single word could negate the generalizations of a lifetime of serious research and thought. Such a word was the adjective utopian” (*The Iron Heel* 334). As my dissertation’s fourth chapter will make clear, the landscapes in London’s speculative fiction were decidedly not utopian.

Two texts by the scholar Bert Bender discuss ecocriticism and dystopian settings in London’s speculative fiction: his 2011 article “Darwin and Ecology in Novels by Jack London and Barbara Kingsolver” and his 2004 book *Evolution and “the Sex Problem”: American Narratives During the Eclipse of Darwinism*. In the latter, Bender characterizes London as a practitioner of deep ecology. Additionally, Murray Bookchin’s *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (1982) and Barbara Lindquist’s “Jack London, Aesthetic Theory, and Nineteenth-Century Popular Science” (1997) discuss the personification in London’s speculative fiction, and the way it is often used to connect his stories to the specific locales from which they emerged. Adapting and applying ecocritical and deep ecological perspectives to London’s speculative fiction increases its value by allowing it to be perceived with much more depth and complexity, and supplies a unique entry point to the study of London’s speculative fiction in the college classroom.

My dissertation’s conclusion will regard the legacy left by London’s genre work. On more than one occasion, George Orwell cited London’s *The Iron Heel* as a formative influence on his *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. But there are other modern speculative fiction authors that owe

London a creative debt, including Olaf Stapledon, Yevgeny Zamyatin, and Karel Capek—three writers who may not be household names, but who coined literary terms and concepts like *Homo superior* and “dystopia,” and, in Capek’s case, with the 1920 play “R.U.R.,” introduced the word “robot” to the English language. The work of these writers shows clear signs of inspiration by tales like *The Iron Heel*, “Goliah,” and “The Rejuvenation of Major Rathbone,” among others. The dissertation’s conclusion will make London’s influence clear, and will cement Jack London’s impact upon the modern speculative fiction landscape. His speculative work deserves its legacy because it kept humanity at the forefront. London understood that, no matter how elaborate or imaginative, a successful story’s setting needs to remain at the service of its inhabitants: a story’s world means precious little if it is not populated with worthwhile characters. London always ensured that his speculative fantasy landscapes remained secondary to the behaviors and interactions of the people inside those landscapes, and in so doing, he helped to elevate speculative fiction from mere escapism to genuine literature.

Ever since he published his first story in 1899, London has been a frontier writer; his writing has always contained what Frederick Jackson Turner, in “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1894), described as “that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom” (Turner 122). It only makes sense, then, that London’s frontier would expand to include the speculative, unknown frontier. My dissertation will conclude with an examination of the terrain London has forged in the literary frontier and the changes his work has wrought upon it. In *The Book of Jack London: A Biography* (1921), Charmian London states repeatedly that Jack, during his lifetime, was frequently dubbed “the Kipling of the Klondike” (C. London 7). She stressed that Jack viewed this nickname as an intensely flattering one. It

seems, however, to be more than a trifle limiting. London's literary output is so varied, eloquent, and meaningful that he deserves to be placed alongside Kipling in the early twentieth century literary canon, not viewed as a regional version of him.

Jack London's speculative fiction catalog is essential to scholars and admirers of the genre's early, establishing history, and yet it remains puzzling to consider that critics at the time considered his efforts in this genre to be unremarkable, particularly relative to the non-fiction and adventure pieces for which he was better known. Many prominent critics of London's day viewed his speculative work so dismissively that they neglected to spend much time and space analyzing it. This dissertation will dismantle any notion that Jack London's speculative fiction was anything less than an important and influential aspect of his legacy, and of the legacy of the genre as a whole. His speculative fiction was invaluable for the allegorical and metaphorical points it made as well as for its stylistic, ecological contributions to this blossoming, evolving brand of literature. Jack London helped to shape the face of speculative fiction, bringing it forward from the abstraction and aloofness of a work like Edwin Abbott's *Flatland* and the forgettable pulp diversion of something like *The Steam Man of the Prairies*. Jack London's speculative fiction did more than supply mere escapism: it recorded, affected, and provoked change.

CHAPTER 1

“THE ONSLAUGHT OF THE UNKNOWN”: THE SOCIAL AND SCIENTIFIC INFLUENCES ON JACK LONDON’S SPECULATIVE FICTION

Jack London’s first piece of published writing was “A Thousand Deaths,” a work of speculative fiction that appeared in the May 1899 installment of the five-cent pulp magazine *The Black Cat* alongside disposable short stories with titles like “The Dutchman’s Mine” and “Miss Wilmarth’s Little Luncheon.” London was twenty-three years old at the time. It is doubtful that too many pulp readers of that era would have predicted the writer behind “A Thousand Deaths,” with its sometimes crude plot holes and excessive reliance upon the passive voice, would turn out to be one of the most important—and popular—literary voices of the early twentieth century. Despite its relative primitiveness, however, London’s debut story remains a work of keen intelligence and imagination, one in which his distinctive approach to the speculative genre is already at least partially visible. Even at this very early stage of his career, when he was still in the process of locating his voice, London created speculative fiction that cut its own unique literary swath, blazing indignantly with emotion and purpose. Virtually since its inception, speculative fiction has served as a literary genre in which writers have cloaked social, political, and cultural messages. London’s work in this genre was no different in that regard; it was his approach to speculative fiction that was unique, and revolutionary. In novels and short stories like “A Thousand Deaths,” *The Iron Heel*, *The Star Rover*, “The Red One,” and “The Shadow and the Flash,” London fabricated far-out societies or fantastic scenarios, and then used them as backdrops for his angry exposes of dangerous Gilded Age behaviors and mindsets. The style that he used to tell these tales was often experimental, as he took what he liked from his favorite writers of the era—like Kipling and Conrad—and made it his own, resulting in themes and

symbols that seemed sharper and more urgent than they would have in a conventional genre environment.

In *Male Call: Becoming Jack London*, Jonathan Auerbach clarifies London's affinity with speculative fiction, pointing out that "what may look like a confusion of motives from a biographical perspective . . . [is] designed to gain the widest possible audience when viewed in the light of late capitalism's postmodern culture" (Auerbach 136). This realization is what encouraged London to spend time inside the speculative fiction genre, concurrently with his more widely known efforts as a memoirist, essayist, and adventure writer. He made frequent mention of how the messages of his fiction were important to him, but that he also wanted to be sure to include "good accessible stuff . . . pseudo-scientific and pseudo-philosophic" subject matter that would make his work "most palatable to most of the rest of the folk who will read it" (qtd. in Auerbach 136). Jack London's literary output, perhaps more than that of any other American writer of his time, is a snapshot of the prevalent sociological viewpoints and attitudes that dominated the time and accompanied the birth of the twentieth century. In crafting his speculative fiction, London was driven by two factors: (1) his literary environment, in the form of his peers, his inspirations, and the works of the time that forged new territory that he wished to follow, and (2) the shifting, restless culture within which he existed, and which was eagerly, aggressively rushing into a new, advanced era, an era that would be characterized by something London himself once described as "the onslaught of the unknown" ("When the World Was Young" 545).

London's inaugural foray into the speculative genre serves up a suitable example of such an onslaught. A breathlessly paced adventure yarn detailing the sinister exploits of a mad scientist—who, unbeknownst to him, happens to be the main character/narrator's long-lost

father—"A Thousand Deaths" mixes the scientific and the seafaring with a level of deftness that belies the story's occasional bouts of clumsy illogic and garbled spurts of exposition like "Brilliant, intermittent sparks of lights flashed athwart my inner consciousness" ("A Thousand Deaths" n.p.). The story also showcases London's infatuation with the scientific and experimental trends of his time; as the tale progresses, and the narrative drifts away from the scientist's machinations to focus more on the main character's plans for escape, it becomes increasingly fascinating—London's prose exhibits a confident familiarity with, and an enthusiasm for, the technical and scientific minutiae of the age. It is easy to become swept along in the tale's final paragraphs, as the main character prepares to eliminate his villainous captors by literally *evaporating* them through some means of anti-gravitational technological device that London describes so plainly and matter-of-factly that one might be forgiven for assuming that it actually exists. "Electrolysis causes . . . molecules to split up and resume their original condition," the narrator patiently explains. "If I could then entice my father within its radius, he would be instantly disintegrated and sent flying to the four corners, a mass of isolated elements" ("A Thousand Deaths" n.p.). While "A Thousand Deaths" does read like the work of an author who is still learning his craft, it nonetheless provides evidence of London's high regard of speculative fiction as a literary genre, even at this early stage in his career; his prose speaks of "the no man's land of the unknowable" with a sense of wonder that is irresistibly infectious ("A Thousand Deaths" n.p.). The story also supplies the most straightforward evidence of what it was that turned London towards this genre to begin with.

At one crucial point in "A Thousand Deaths," London applies the brakes to his hurtling narrative to make hypothetical mention of the "existence of a force, the converse of gravitation, which Astor has named 'apergy'" ("A Thousand Deaths" n.p.). The significance of this line is

twofold. First, it showcases, yet again, London's keen cognizance of the scientific/experimental trends, fads, and advancements of his day. As Dale Pond explicates in his essay "John Keely's Accomplishments," the concept of "apergy," as coined by a Philadelphia pseudo-scientist named John Keely, was a vague, ultimately discredited means of generating an ether stronger than steam (Pond n.p.). It was an idea that gained a small amount of traction in the late nineteenth century before dissipating; London assimilated it seamlessly into "A Thousand Deaths," thereby skillfully supplying his short piece with some cultural cachet. Second, London's reference to apergy highlights the level of inspiration he took from other speculative fiction works and writers, as well as the level of trust that he placed in his reader, whom he implicitly assumed would be at least glancingly familiar with the term, thanks to Keely's brief period of infamy.

The "Astor" to whom London refers in this line was the writer and entrepreneur John Jacob Astor IV, who invested in many of John Keely's chimerical inventions, and who also composed *A Journey in Other Worlds* (1894), a commercially successful pulp novel that dealt with apergy as a plot engine. London seized upon Astor's work as a direct inspiration for his own, and made a point of pausing his own story to mention Astor's. In "The Life of Jack London as Reflected in his Works" (1998), Murray Lundberg characterizes Jack London as among the first speculative fiction writers who took the time to emphasize the legacy and the history of the genre in his own work. "London's rough view of the world changed dramatically" as he studied these works, writes Lundberg, allowing him to come up with a brand of speculative fiction that served as "a mixture of science, philosophy, and anthropology, written with a strong sense of irony, and tinged with a strange vein of black humour" (Lundberg n.p.). Absent any sort of traditional education, the young London vociferously consumed all the literature he could find, as a means not only to improve his worth as a writer, but also to educate himself on the

world around him. As a result, his work often exhibited both a speculative and a reactive quality, his most potent works not only serving as examples of effective storytelling but also as a means of wry, personal commentary on the quirks, failings, and intricacies of modern society.

“A Thousand Deaths,” along with the rest of London’s speculative output, admittedly holds little in common with John Jacob Astor’s lone foray into the literary world, aside from their shared references to obscure scientific fads. Astor’s tale is a crude yet entertaining sprint through many of the space adventure tropes of the time that had been popularized by the likes of Edgar Rice Burroughs and Gustavus W. Pope; his characters travel to Jupiter and encounter all manner of giant monsters and the like. The book sold well, but there was no reader, at the time or since, who has ever regarded it as anything other than sheer escapism. *The Athenaeum*, a literary journal of the time, only devoted a couple sentences to reviewing Astor’s work, and spent most of the review speculating about how accurate Astor’s elaborate depiction of life on Jupiter might be (“Mr. Astor’s New Romance” 275). London was not interested in such intricate, fantastical world-building; he was less concerned with describing what kind of aliens might reside on a far-off planet and more concerned with ruminating on what might occur if society’s increasing class divide were taken to an apocalyptic extreme. His tales typically utilized grittier themes like societal collapse, ill-fated experiments, and ominous scientific discoveries to underline deeper cultural and socialistic points. In this way, as John Riedler points out in *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2008), London owes a stylistic debt to a pair of high-profile speculative texts from his era: Edwin Abbott’s 1884 novel *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* and Edward Bellamy’s 1884 novel *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (Riedler 7).

A dedicated theologian, Edwin A. Abbott wrote *Flatland* after retiring as headmaster at the City of London School. It was his first—and only—work of fiction; his primary literary output consisted of textbooks, several theological works (many of which he opted to publish anonymously), and a biography of Francis Bacon (O'Connor n.p.). *Flatland*, which Abbott signed pseudonymously as “A Square,” is a depiction of a world composed entirely of shapes—men are multi-sided; women are straight lines; characters maneuver between Flatland, Pointland, and Spaceland; a character referred to as “the Sphere” sets the plot into motion with his/its attempts to introduce a three-dimensional world to the proceedings. The dense mythology that Abbott has concocted is offset by the blunt social satire that his work supplies: in Flatland’s rigidly hierarchical society, the more sides a shape has, the higher it can advance—hexagons exist in a higher social stratum than pentagons, and so forth. Women are depicted as nothing more than lines, thereby powerless and inconsequential. Any deformed or irregular shapes that happen to spring up are either relegated to the lowest, most menial of the classes, or eliminated altogether, in what could be called an example of speculative eugenics. The “Workmen,” Abbott explains, “can hardly be said to deserve the name of human Figures, since they have not all their sides equal, with them therefore the Law of Nature does not hold” (Abbott 9). The principal conflict of *Flatland* occurs when the rebellious main characters, “Square” and “Sphere,” dare to make the claim that there is another, higher level of existence that exists outside Flatland’s two-dimensional world. Abbott’s allegory is far from subtle, but his story’s template hews to the now-commonplace formula of one charismatic figure leading a rebellion against an oppressive, fascistic society. Shorn of the mathematical gimmickry that was its ostensible *raison d’être*, *Flatland* becomes the tale of a lawyer who is prodded by a charismatic figure from another realm into accepting a new way of life—and who is then persecuted and imprisoned when he resists the

status quo and attempts to spread the knowledge of this new way of life to his peers. Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1908), published nearly two decades after *Flatland* first saw print, is a tale, nearly identical from a structural standpoint, about a member of high society who meets a magnetic revolutionary from the working class who pulls back the curtain on the dangerous, oligarchic ruling system in charge of everything.

The Iron Heel is presented as a memoir written by Avis Everhard, its main character/heroine, which has been found some time after her demise by a character named Anthony Meredith, who annotates and comments upon her story as it is told to us. Avis describes her upbringing as the daughter of an upper-crust family; her introduction to Ernest Everhard, a charismatic freedom fighter who eventually becomes her husband; and the rebellion that the two of them mount against the Iron Heel of the title, an oppressive, oligarchical regime that keeps the lower classes subservient by controlling the banks (and, eventually, by utilizing a team of violent mercenaries). The Everhards are ultimately caught and executed for their actions—but Meredith, speaking from his vantage point of three hundred years in the future, offers the cold comfort that the Iron Heel was eventually overthrown and the new world is now a socialist one.

A concurrent reading of *Flatland* and *The Iron Heel* reveals a notable structural and stylistic kinship between the two works. In both texts, a conventional narrative does not emerge until well after the fictional world has been painstakingly established—and in both cases, the passion of the author clearly resides more in crafting dystopian allegories than in telling straightforward pulp tales. A vocal advocate of social equality at a time when such viewpoints were not widely expressed in literature, Abbott halts his story's forward momentum, such as it is, at frequent intervals to speak in thinly veiled metaphors about how "One touch of Nature makes

all worlds akin.” “Points, Lines, Squares, Cubes, Extra-Cubes,” he has his main character proclaim, “we are all liable to the same errors, all alike the Slaves of our respective Dimensional prejudices” (Abbott 24). Similarly, London allows close to ten chapters of *The Iron Heel* to elapse before any kind of recognizable narrative takes shape, and even then, he frequently seems to lose interest in the plot, shifting his focus to the socially conscious, emotionally charged moments wherein Avis Everhard mourns her world’s lack of social equality: “All their old liberties were gone,” she laments about the lower class. “They were labor-slaves. Choice of work was denied them . . . there in the labor-ghettos is the roaring abysmal beast the oligarchs fear so dreadfully—but it is the best of their own making. In it they will not let the ape and tiger die” (*The Iron Heel* 319). Avis and Ernest Everhard exist in a world that could not be more removed from the fantasia inhabited by the rebellious shapes of Abbott’s *Flatland*, but at several points in each tale, the characters might as well be speaking the same language.

In her *School Science and Mathematics* piece “On Teaching ‘Flatland’” (1984), Joan Baum recommends ignoring Abbott’s narrative altogether and zeroing in on the story’s criticisms of Victorian London (Baum 63). Likewise, the majority of essays on teaching *The Iron Heel*, such as those depicted on the “Shadows of Light” educational blog, emphasize the book’s “dramatic irony” and London’s intent to “inform society that the working class is powerless at overwhelming capitalism, and socialism is not achievable in its near future” (“Shadows of Light” n.p.). *Flatland* might not have been as immediately successful as Astor’s *A Journey in Other Worlds*, but its value as an innovative work of speculative social satire has allowed its reputation to increase over time. Abbott’s bizarre parable about shapes at war directly influenced Jack London’s speculative fiction and also helped set the stage for the boom in satirical genre fiction that writers like H.G. Wells and Edgar Rice Burroughs brought into the twentieth century.

In 1888, four years after *Flatland* emerged, Edward Bellamy published *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*. At the time, Bellamy was suffering from tuberculosis and struggling to support his family as a fiction writer—his early efforts, like 1880’s *Dr. Heidenhoff’s Process*, tended towards the excessively maudlin and failed to make much of a critical or commercial impact. *Looking Backward* put an end, though, to Bellamy’s financial difficulties and anonymity. A socialist gloss on “Rip Van Winkle” that also borrowed heavily from the anonymously published 1881 novel *The Great Romance*, Bellamy’s story concerns Julian West, a Bostonite who falls asleep in 1887 and awakens one hundred and thirteen years later to a decidedly different Boston. The novel then follows West as he navigates this unfamiliar terrain and attempts to determine which version of Boston is superior.

Looking Backward was a sensation. It was one of the best-selling books of its time and spawned a small industry of copycats, parodies, rebuttals told from a capitalist perspective, and pseudo-sequels (one of which, *An Experiment in Marriage: A Romance*, was penned by Bellamy’s own brother). Bellamy himself composed a follow-up, *Equality*, in 1897. The book’s success even encouraged the formulation of “nationalist clubs” throughout the U.S.—gatherings that were intended to discuss the themes in *Looking Backward* but soon evolved into socialist political rallies (“How I Came to Write *Looking Backward*” n.p.). Bellamy rode the coattails of his book’s success into a career in politics, publishing a nationalist magazine and delivering speeches in which he extolled the benefits of a “utopian socialist society” (“How I Came to Write *Looking Backward*” n.p.). Edwin Abbott had presented speculative fiction in the form of social satire with *Flatland*; four years later, with *Looking Backward*, Edward Bellamy made this type of SF commercially viable. The success of Bellamy’s novel alerted Jack London to the possibilities of speculative fiction as a social tool and potential catalyst for change. Jonathan

Auerbach notes that London's own views on socialism were "far more idiosyncratic [than those of Bellamy], deriving less from abstract theories of social systems than from his own complex sense of his work as a writer" (Auerbach 120). The speculative genre afforded London the opportunity to break free from "the philosophical pretensions that sometimes plagued his overtly socialist essays, enabling him to give freer reign to sensational fantasy" (125). It is easy to discern London's zealous belief in the validity of his socialist ideals and his desire to express them in his writing in a way that would be impactful and even potentially influential to his readers; Abbott and especially Bellamy served as examples of how this could be done, effectively, in speculative fiction.

Speculative fiction, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was an overwhelmingly plot-driven genre: the most popular pieces, like *War of the Worlds*, *A Plunge Into Space*, *The Last American*, and even L. Frank Baum's "Oz" stories tended to contain easily identifiable narratives that delivered in color, atmosphere, and entertainment value what they might have lacked in thematic depth. Initially, *Looking Backward* also reads like it will fit into that category, depositing the character of Julian West into a futuristic Boston, alone, confused, and with no means of escape. West even meets a couple of sympathetic characters—the avuncular Doctor Leete and his comely daughter Edith—who serve not only as his willing allies but as his noble, exceedingly well-meaning guides in this new society. However, like *Flatland* and *The Iron Heel*, *Looking Backward* ultimately proves more interested in exploring theoretical ideas than advancing narrative. Bellamy, more so than Abbott and London, eventually shrugs off any pretense of straightforward storytelling and morphs his story into a series of lectures—some satirical, some deadly serious—about life in the fictional/hypothetical Boston of the next millennium. "If you would see men again the beasts of prey they seemed in the nineteenth

century,” he warns darkly near his tale’s end, “all you have to do is restore the old social and industrial system, which taught them to view their natural prey in their fellow-men, and find their gain in the loss of others” (Bellamy n.p.). Presented with this sentence, without attribution, it would be difficult to determine whether the speaker is Julian West, Avis Everhard, or Edwin Abbott’s “Square,” so connected are the characters’ viewpoints and motives.

In her essay “Utopia and Epic: Ideological Confrontations in Jack London’s *The Iron Heel*” (1976), Nadia Khouri commends the skillful way that *The Iron Heel*, *Looking Backward*, and *Flatland* spotlight some alarming characteristics about the societies in which they were *written* by shining a harsh light upon the societies in which they are *set*. “If socialist utopias are products of an alienated world,” she says, “they are also its negations and plans for a new, de-alienated one” (Khouri n.p.). In *Looking Backward*, then, “the extreme individualism of 19th century America is replaced by collective Christian Socialism in service of the nation,” while in *The Iron Heel*, “the sharp and frictive class struggle of the early 20th century is both exasperated and provided with a horizon of a new age’s brotherhood and stability” (Khouri n.p.). Jack London regarded Abbott and Bellamy as two of his most important inspirations, but he drew inspiration from their purpose much more than from their style; he took notice of the way they used the speculative genre to express the points they wanted to make—addressing in fiery prose, and against a fantastical backdrop, disquietingly relevant notions of social injustice, prejudice, and systemic corruption.

Injustice, of course, was a concept with which London was all too familiar during his hardscrabble, relatively self-made youth among the canneries and ports of northern California. London’s formative years remain popular fodder among scholars of the writer’s life and work. His friendship with poet and librarian Ina Coolbrith, specifically, remains a profoundly

meaningful, contributing factor in his development as a writer; while working at the Oakland Library, Coolbrith took a motherly, encouraging interest in young Jack that he hailed years later as uplifting and formative. “You were the first one who ever complimented me on my choice of reading matter,” London fawned in a letter he wrote her in 1906. “If you only knew how proud your words made me” (qtd. in Haley 225). An accomplished poet herself, Coolbrith befriended a number of prominent writers who passed through California in the late 1800’s. Ambrose Bierce was perhaps the most high-profile of Coolbrith’s literary acquaintances. Bierce, of course, had achieved renown at the end of the 19th century for often macabre tales like “The Boarded Window” and “The Affair at Coulter’s Notch,” which slyly situated disturbing truths about savagery during the Civil War inside the horror genre. Young Jack London crossed paths with Bierce in Coolbrith’s library, taking note of his unique storytelling tactics—his suffusion of irony into his stories, his usage of horror motifs to illuminate true-life inhumanity, his employment of deliberate pacing and scrupulous background detail.

Bierce’s most famous work of fiction probably remains “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” (1890), the hair-raisingly eerie tale of a war prisoner who “escapes” his execution. In 1915, London published *The Star Rover*, also an account of a prisoner who is able to achieve some form of escape—in this case, though, it turns out to be of the psychic variety, as his main character acquires the means to will himself into his past lives. Bierce’s short story ends with a famously jarring twist that recalibrates everything that has come before and underscores the terror and tragedy of war. London’s novel eschews any sort of surprise ending, but does conclude on a similarly bleak note that calls attention to the deep corruption of the modern prison system. Both of these works open with their main characters in life-threatening peril. Both works traffic in surreal, dreamlike imagery to convey the desperation and hopelessness of their

characters' situations. Both offer similarly despairing denouements and reveal themselves to be commentaries about pertinent social issues—in Bierce's case, the cruelty and deception of war; and in London's case, the urgent need for prison reform. By all accounts, Ambrose Bierce and Jack London were not personally fond of each other; Bierce once stated that London wrote "as if his digestion, like his politics and rhetoric, was out of order," and the two men purportedly engaged in a row in 1910 at California's Bohemian Grove (Potocki n.p.). But, when comparing their work, the similarities are impossible to ignore: Bierce's fiction can be identified as a clear influence upon London's.

Two other writers of this era by whom London was deeply inspired were Rudyard Kipling and Joseph Conrad. London was not shy when it came to admitting this, all but shouting his admiration for Kipling and Conrad from the rooftops. References and homages to both writers appear in many places in London's fiction and nonfiction. He was enamored with their adventurousness, their free-spiritedness, their abundance of imagination, and what he perceived as their extreme level of connectedness to the world around them—a world that, London implied, was pointedly being ignored by the majority of their artistic contemporaries. In "These Bones Shall Rise Again" (1903), an impassioned essay about Kipling's impact on the literary world, London called him one of the most important artists of the nineteenth century, praising his "love of actuality, his intense practicality, his proper and necessary respect for the hard-headed, hard-fisted fact" ("These Bones Shall Rise Again" 65). Similarly, London took pride in declaring himself one of Joseph Conrad's principal American champions, barraging the author with admiring fan mail and poring over his prose with feverish intensity. "I am glad that I am alive," London once wrote to a friend, referring to one of Conrad's books, "if, for no other reason, because of the joy of reading this book" (qtd. in Hayes 26).

In “How Jack London Read Joseph Conrad” (1998), Kevin J. Hayes paints the picture of London reading one of Conrad’s novels and becoming so fascinated and inspired that he began scribbling notes for one of his own stories in the blank leaves at the book’s end (Hayes 18). In this article, Hayes sorts through all the Conrad books that London owned and records each instance wherein London made a notation or a highlight in the text. London read Conrad, Hayes concludes, “to inspire his own writing and to gather new techniques and new story ideas. Sometimes Conrad used images that so impressed London that he utilized them in his own work. On other occasions, stimulated by Conrad’s writing, London wrote something that echoed and yet opposed Conrad” (18). Hayes describes London highlighting a particularly eloquent passage about the fascination of an open river in Conrad’s short story “The Faithful River” and then scrawling his own variation on the same passage in the margin: “No inlet so unattractive that it lacks the fascination of adventure.” “Altogether,” Hayes enthuses, Conrad “provided a storehouse of images, characterizations, and ideas that London could use in his work” (21). Throughout his career, London frequently and enthusiastically cited both Kipling and Conrad as major influences on his writing. This influence can be seen in his speculative fiction.

Despite the preponderance of anthropomorphic animals scurrying around within the pages of 1894’s *The Jungle Book*, neither Kipling nor Conrad could be characterized as speculative fiction writers. They specialized, for the most part, in chronicling real-world adventures, characters that were sometimes larger than life, and landscapes that often might have *seemed* alien to readers of the time. London was drawn to the morals at the heart of their tales, and the meanings beneath their descriptions of ill-fated voyages and faraway cultures.

London’s story “The Red One” describes a scientist embarking upon an expedition into the wilderness that grows increasingly eerie and unpredictable, and drives the scientist

increasingly mad; in his essay “The Myth of Hope in Jack London’s ‘The Red One’” (1998), Lawrence I. Berkove points out the parallels between this “psychologically suggestive” tale and Conrad’s 1899 masterpiece *Heart of Darkness* (Berkove 204). Indeed, a direct comparison of the journeys undertaken by Charles Marlow and Bassett, the explorer who serves as the main character of “The Red One,” is eye-opening, and illuminates the similarities of the two works. Both Marlow and Bassett are driven into the deepest, darkest, most impenetrable places on the planet by little beyond a selfish sense of adventure. Bassett plunges into the jungles of Guadalcanal in search of a rare species of butterfly (and, implicitly, the glory that would accompany its discovery); Marlow is driven to hack his way into the Congo by his abiding excitement at the prospect of forging territory akin to “the center of the earth” (Conrad 18). Both men eventually become obsessively sustained by a single-minded goal; Marlow wants to find and retrieve the elusive Kurtz, while Bassett wants to learn the mysteries at the heart of the pulsating, alien red orb at the center of the jungle. Both encounter indigenous people whose brutalized, bedraggled appearance serves as an ominous sign of dangers to come. Marlow comes across misshapen, horribly emaciated African railroad workers whose very presence evokes in him “the sunlit face of the land . . . the hidden evil . . . the profound darkness of its heart” (29). Bassett sees natives who have been savagely beaten, dismembered, and left for dead; their suffering is proof, in his mind, of the jungle’s “parasitic dripping of decadent life-forms that rooted in death and lived on death” (“The Red One” 271). Both journeys offer restrained climaxes; in *Heart of Darkness*, the first appearance of Kurtz—pale, sickly, and confined to a stretcher—is the very opposite of intimidating; and in “The Red One,” the natives seem utterly unconcerned about the history of the alien red object that resides in their midst. After spending a great deal of time praising Kurtz and establishing him as a figure worthy of extreme awe,

Marlow's description of Kurtz seems almost *too* effusive, as if he were trying to convince himself of the man's greatness. Not only does he, rather inexplicably, laud Kurtz's appearance as "impressively bald," Marlow also offhandedly admits that he is "not prepared to affirm the fellow was exactly worth the life we lost in getting to him" (Conrad 51). Meanwhile, each time Bassett asks the members of the jungle tribe about the red one, their hasty, infuriating response displays their disinterest in the alien object in their midst, and their increasing interest in cannibalizing Bassett. "Will the Red One speak to-morrow?" Bassett asks Ngurn, the tribal chief, who merely shrugs. "I would like to have the curing of your head," Ngurn changed the subject. "It is different than any other head." ("The Red One" 272). *Heart of Darkness* and "The Red One" both also end with the main characters embittered, regretful, and filled with hatred and distrust towards civilized society. Marlow speaks darkly at his journey's end of being back in civilization and "resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other . . . to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams" (Conrad 66). The dying Bassett, in the closing moments of "The Red One," finds himself admitting with his final thoughts that the natives "played squarer than square" and were "forerunner[s] of ethics and contract, of consideration, and gentleness in man" ("The Red One" 276). They may have ended differently, but the swaths cut through the unknown woodlands by Conrad's Marlow and London's Bassett were notably alike in many respects.

In "Jack London's *Heart of Darkness*" (1958), Sam Baskett restates London's claim, reiterated by his widow Charmain in her biography, that he identified with the character of Charles Marlow, particularly as he was depicted in Conrad's 1898 short story "Youth." Charmian London later asserted that Jack also felt a unique kinship with Bassett in "The Red One," an arrogant, interloping, ultimately imperceptive character who bears more than a passing

resemblance to Marlow (C. London 334). Baskett emphasizes that London was drawn to Conrad's work because it dealt with "an individual's attempt to achieve self-identifying values in a tragic and ironic universe" (Baskett 70). Much of London's speculative writing unfolded in a similar universe and strove, like Conrad's, to "illuminate . . . the mystery of existence" (68). Just as Marlow's sojourn up the Congo in *Heart of Darkness* proves frustrating and unsatisfying, Bassett's quest deep into the jungles of the Guadalcanal in "The Red One" leaves him not with the answers to the meaning of life that he had sought, but the chilling resolution that "in that cosmic ferment, all must be comparatively alike, comparatively of the same substance, or substances, save for the freaks of the ferment" ("The Red One" 265). The journeys of Bassett and Marlow come to different conclusions, but both men make the same discovery in the end: trips that are undertaken with the intent of illuminating some sort of undefined darkness rarely result in anything other than more darkness.

The final image Baskett supplies of London in his article is a rather melancholy one of an ailing yet unfailingly enthusiastic admirer of Joseph Conrad who corresponded with him on numerous occasions, often with what seemed like the eagerness of a neglected child desperate for some sort of approval or acknowledgement. The two writers exchanged pleasantries and expressed cordial admiration for each other's work—and, in one letter, Conrad offered London "a grateful and cordial handgrasp," ("A Letter Exchange with Joseph Conrad" 157). However, Baskett makes the claim that Conrad's regard for London's work, in actuality, never extended beyond the polite and perfunctory, "for Conrad's reserve against London's verbal intemperance and his rigid adherence to artistic standards which exclude most of London's work inevitably make him chary of acknowledging even a distant kinship to the American writer" (Baskett 77). No evidence exists of any sort of significant correspondence between London and Rudyard

Kipling, despite the fact that London was arguably even more effusive towards Kipling in print, and Kipling's work proved to be even more striking of an influence on London's speculative fiction. In "When the World Was Young," his account of a well-off lawyer who transforms into a snarling Neanderthal at night, London refers outright to Kipling's 1891 short story "The Finest Story in the World" (though London erroneously calls the piece's title "Greatest Story in the World"), which describes a bank clerk who may or may not have been a Viking in a past life. Both tales possess a similar plot and a shared sense of awe at the nebulous sense of connection between the present and the past; London has his characters muse about the "thousand voices whispering . . . through the darkness" ("When the World Was Young" 544). Kipling, meanwhile, has his story's narrator speak with wonder about looking "where never man had been permitted to look with full knowledge since Time began" ("The Finest Story in the World" n.p.).

Reference and homages to this particular Kipling tale appear in many of London's speculative fiction works. "The Finest Story in the World" adopts a tongue-in-cheek approach to the belief in reincarnation, treating it as a reaction to the fear of death. "I am afraid to be kicked, but I am not afraid of death, because I know what I know," one of the tale's characters shouts at another. "You are not afraid to be kicked, but you are afraid to die . . . you cannot play with the Gods" ("The Finest Story in the World" n.p.). London's *The Star Rover* takes a similar wary view of the notion of past lives; Darrell Standing, the beleaguered main character, smugly shrugs off any thoughts of death, past lives, or the afterlife by rhetorically asking "Why burden my mind with thoughts about certainties?" (*The Star Rover* 425). Both works also conclude with a warning that those who spend too much time speculating about who they might have been in a previous incarnation do so at the risk of irreparably damaging their *present* incarnations. The

narrator of “The Finest Story in the World” closes out that story by contemplating “why the Lords of Life and Death shut the doors so carefully behind us. It is that we may not remember our first wooings” (“The Finest Story in the World” n.p.). Darrell Standing, meanwhile, tries meekly to reassure himself that life is cyclical and death is impermanent as he awaits his execution, but his language devolves into bathetic ravings about his flesh melting “into the flux and [crystallizing] into fresh and diverse forms that are ephemeral and that melt back into the flux,” and any greater point he intended to make about life’s meaning remains buried beneath the delirium (*The Star Rover* 467).

Before Adam (1907), London’s serialized novel about a society of rival Neanderthal tribes, employs a very similar conceit to “The Finest Story in the World” by providing its tale of warring cave dwellers with a modern-day narrator who pauses the action and periodically interjects to ponder his “racial memories”—his dreams of a past self (*Before Adam* 17). The story’s nameless narrator is a modern man, and the incidents that he describes occurred to an ancient ancestor of his, a cave-dweller named Big Tooth. He is only now remembering this past life as it occurs to him in dreams. This structural choice enables London to tell his prehistoric tale from a detached, ironic remove, allowing him to comment on the characters and their behavior as his story unfolds—and to gloss over any potential plot holes by claiming a lapse in his characters’ memory of that specific incident. In “The Finest Story in the World,” Kipling works in much the same way, to great effect; his main character is only there to listen to the twenty-year-old banker, Charlie Mears, reflect on his dreams of life lived centuries ago among the Vikings. This narrative approach enhances both tales, supplying them with a folkloric, surreal sense of history being recorded, particularly when each main character begins recalling memories within memories and dreams within dreams. In one of *Before Adam*’s most

nightmarish moments, shortly after its bloody climax, the main character speaks of Big Tooth, his ancestor, succumbing to a series of dreams about *his own* ancestors, going all the way back to “the shore slime of the primeval sea” (61). “I cannot, I dare not, say more,” the narrator finally says. “It is all too vague and complicated and awful” (61). “The Finest Story in the World” traps its narrative inside a comparable puzzle box, with a character referring to Charlie’s plight by asking “How shall you all fear death if you all know what your friend does not know that he knows? He will remember a little and a little less, and he will call it dreams. Then he will forget altogether . . . trailing clouds of glory, you know” (“The Finest Story in the World” n.p.). In Kipling’s tale, as well as in *Before Adam* and *The Star Rover*, obsession with the past—constantly looking back—proves to be damning. It causes Darrell Standing, *The Star Rover*’s main character, to march blissfully off to his own execution, and inspires *Before Adam*’s narrator to sink into a morass of paranoia and despair, admitting that Big Tooth is “so real to me that often I am unable to tell what age I am living in” (*Before Adam* 73). Kipling’s Charlie Mears is able to free himself from his nostalgia only by seizing the present, venturing forth into society and finding a girlfriend, for it is “the love of a woman that kills remembrance” (“The Finest Story in the World” n.p.).

Kevin J. Hayes emphasizes a passage from Joseph Conrad’s groundbreaking island adventure novel *Victory* that London found particularly memorable: “The young man learned to reflect, which is a destructive process, a reckoning of the cost” (qtd. in Hayes 23). This notion of reflection—of dwelling upon the past—as a damaging character flaw is a recurring theme not only in Conrad’s work, but in Kipling’s, and London’s, as well. Indeed, much of London’s late speculative fiction is about this very subject; at its heart, *The Star Rover* is a tragic account of the pointlessness of a life spent looking back. Auerbach, in his biographical attempt to connect Jack

London the personality to Jack London the writer, refers at several moments to the way that “the destruction of the new (copyright) rather than the resurrection of the old (natural history) galvanizes London’s energy” (Auerbach 85). Auerbach goes on to discuss the “self-transcendence” at the heart of much of London’s genre writing, and the way that the writer’s most vivid depictions of the past are those that “are quite literally *lyric* in that they are almost always detachable from the plot,” thus ensuring that the forward action—that which drives the story—remains at a calculated remove from any nostalgic or elegiac moments that may appear, and that any references to the past avoid the mistake of morbid reflection (102). London skillfully avoided resorting to any structural or narrative cliché and kept his work fresh by pushing ever forward and working to advance new ideas.

Drawing inspiration from the energy, the vitality, and the forward momentum present in the works of Bellamy, Abbott, Bierce, Kipling, and Conrad, London used the future to comment on the present, and the past to speculate on the future. He situated parables like *The Iron Heel*, *Goliath*, and “The Scarlet Plague” in alternate, futuristic, post-apocalyptic societies, but populated them with recognizable historical moments and characters. The title character of *Goliath*, piling one bold threat and radical campaign promise on top of another, could be a stand-in for any tough-talking, aggressive politician or civic leader, from Eugene Debs to Theodore Roosevelt. “You shall have peace,” *Goliath* crows, in a manner that seems to foretell every political promise of “a new day” that would emerge hence. “Make festival for the new age that is dawning. Be like children upon your hills, and witness the passing of war . . . I promise you a merry day” (“*Goliath*” (84). Granser, the morose former professor at the heart of “The Scarlet Plague,” quickly evokes any member of a suddenly archaic profession whom societal and technological advancements suddenly threaten to render obsolete. Recalling his final moments

at his university, Granser intones that he viewed himself as “already dead,” then grimly, melodramatically summarizes his descent into obsolescence: “For a century and a half had this university, like a splendid machine, been running steadily. And now, in an instant, it had stopped. It was like seeing the sacred flame die down on some thrice-sacred altar” (“The Scarlet Plague” 328). *The Iron Heel*, as Nadia Khouri outlines, depicts “the auspicious social balance of the Brotherhood of Man era [as] an inevitable outcome of both biological and socioeconomic evolution” (Khouri n.p.).

Khouri lists the Russian Revolution of 1905 as the primary source behind many of *The Iron Heel*'s plot elements, characters, and points of view, writing, “The massacre of workers by Cossacks . . . the great general strike which paralyzed Russia in October . . . then the crushing of the December insurrection in Moscow, certainly have their echoes in the novel,” (Khouri n.p.).

Khouri adds that the creation of fantasy worlds like utopias depend “not only on material preconditions . . . but also on the fact that the alternative society is at the author’s historical moment an accessible contingency” (Khouri n.p.). In the case of Jack London and his peers, that historical moment happened to be one of the most significant and tumultuous since his country’s birth. The Gilded Age was an era of great scientific, technological, psychological, and social advancements and upheavals. London’s genre writing drew influence from the torrent of ideas, both positive and negative, that emerged from this era.

The *Digital History* website describes the Gilded Age as “years of unprecedented technological innovation, mass immigration, and intense political partisanship,” while also making note of the rapid introduction of the new forms of entertainment and means of distributing information that occurred during these years (“Overview of the Gilded Age” n.p.). Modern-day historians tend to paint this time as an aggressively positive and fruitful one,

wherein the majority of Americans responded favorably and adapted easily to the constant changes that were happening before their eyes at a stunning pace. In her essay “Blood on the Tracks” (2011), however, Cecelia Holland summarizes the Gilded Age in a markedly different fashion:

The economy was broken. Abrupt industrialization, imported wholesale from England and therefore occurring in a single generation rather than building across centuries, had developed capital resources and built infrastructure, but it had destroyed the work that supported huge numbers of people. The machines had stolen their jobs . . . meanwhile, a slavish, not to say selfish managerial devotion to returns on capital was making a lucky handful of men at the top obscenely rich (Holland 3).

London, along with his peers, seized upon the national sense of ambivalence and the public mixture of wariness and curiosity that these changes wrought. Relatively modern critics like Nathaniel Rich and Rodger Jacobs point out the prevalent Social Darwinism in works like *The Call of the Wild* and *Martin Eden*. In his recent analysis of *The Call of the Wild* in *The Daily Beast*, Rich makes note of the way that London “rhapsodizes the glories of virility” (Rich n.p.). Meanwhile, in “Running with the Wolves: Jack London, the Cult of Masculinity, and ‘Might is Right,’” Jacobs suggests that London’s “idea that man, at his best, is a wild predator is a dangerous idea” and adds that London’s own literary attitudes about socialism were further inflamed by the increasingly complicated, increasingly contradictory world around him, a world “dominated by imperialism, social Darwinism, and a style of aggressive masculinity” (Jacobs n.p.). The characters in much of London’s fiction, and no small amount of his non-fiction, employed their individualism wrongly and misguidedly, as a tool to combat their notions of imperialism and natural selection. Granser, in “The Scarlet Plague,” uses his sense of

individualism to hang onto his title as a professor at a time and place wherein such titles have long since grown irrelevant. Darrell Standing, in *The Star Rover*, uses it to deceive himself about his identity as a murderer and his oncoming demise. Paul and Lloyd, in London's short story "The Shadow and the Flash," engage their inflated egos and conflicting senses of individualism in an increasingly woebegone, foolhardy attempt to defy the very laws of science

Thus, taking cues from his literary forebears, London responded to the social crises brought upon by the Gilded Age and worked to address them through his own speculative narratives. He recognized the commercial viability of fantasies like *Looking Backward* that readers could choose to interpret as escapist romps or as the stern works of social commentary that they were beneath the trappings. He emulated the graceful stylings of writers like Conrad, Kipling, and Bierce to build exaggerated, carefully assembled, fantastical depictions of imperialism, Darwinism, and masculinity—which he then typically demolished from within. In stories like "The Shadow and the Flash," "Goliath," and "The Scarlet Plague," the main characters are defined—and, in some cases, undone—by their overweening masculinity and excessive hubris. "Big-Fat was the voice of God, but he took Broken-Rib and made him into a priest, so that he became the voice of Big-Fat," the narrator of London's "The Strength of the Strong" glumly explains near that story's end. "And both had other men to be servants for them . . . and more and more men were taken away from work, so that those that were left worked harder than ever before" ("The Strength of the Strong" 530). London supplies, in this presentation of a parable involving a fictitious group of Neanderthals, an extended example of social Darwinism at its most crystalline.

"The Shadow and the Flash," an account of two rival scientists who square off in an increasingly frenzied competition to discover invisibility, serves as an example not only of

London's skeptical view of the fickle, often excessively whimsical fads in science, chemistry, and medicine that propagated during the Gilded Age, but also as an example of why criticizing these trends through speculative fiction often proved so effective. It is among the *leanest* tales London ever told, occurring almost entirely through the dialogue exchanges between the rivals, Paul and Lloyd, with the occasional wry interjection from their mutual friend, the story's hapless narrator. Paul and Lloyd are characterized through their speech, their actions, and their fierce competitiveness—the only thing they can agree upon is their derision for the more tried-and-true, unflashy methods of experimental science and medicine that the Gilded Age seemed to be striving to render immaterial. Paul and Lloyd leap excitedly and impatiently from one new idea to the next—and in the end, their reliance on the new and untested at the expense of the traditional is what does them in. Their obstinate refusal to substitute proven fact for speculative fancy not only results in their deaths; it results in their literal evaporation from existence. Testing each of their methods of invisibility on themselves, Paul and Lloyd vanish from sight, and their disembodied voices can be heard arguing as they begin scuffling. Eventually, in a flash of light, they disappear, and the narrator chooses to memorialize them by destroying both of their laboratories. “Science is a tabooed topic in my house,” he insists. “I have returned to my roses. Nature's colors are good enough for me” (“The Shadow and the Flash” 371). Paul and Lloyd are gone, suddenly and without explanation; they never reappear. Similarly, the villain in “A Thousand Deaths” is vaporized at the story's end, leaving nothing but a pile of clothes behind. In London's speculative fiction, then, those who refuse to hew to the tenets of logic and reason are punished by the most ignominious literary fate imaginable: they are *erased*—as if they had never been. They become “like the wind sighing among the pines” (“A Thousand Deaths” n.p.). Above all, “The Shadow and the Flash” is a trim, fast-paced narrative that provides London the

chance to experiment with his storytelling style by evoking the mad scientist tales of pulp magazines and penny dreadfuls. But it is also a literary reaction to the faddish scientific “advancements” of the age, and an indictment of those who choose willful ignorance over common sense. As such, it is hard to imagine a more impactful warning than one that ends with its two principals disintegrating into nothingness.

With its tendency towards the dramatization of terror and awe, and towards the depiction of extreme possibilities, speculative fiction was the ideal genre for London’s cautionary tales about greed, stubbornness, and inhumanity, and the dawn of the twentieth century was the ideal timeframe in which to set them. It was a timeframe saturated with that very greed, stubbornness, and inhumanity. Mark Twain, in his work that gave this time its name, cynically characterized it as “a time when one is filled with vague longings; when one . . . folds his hands and says, What is the use of struggling, and toiling and worrying any more? Let us give it all up” (Twain 432). It was an era in which much of the working class was weighted down with malaise and a sense of futility; people strove to find escapism in whatever forms it existed, whether it was pulp fiction, melodramatic theater, or other, less savory vices. Stories like Astor’s *A Journey in Other Worlds* and plays like Joseph Arthur’s *Blue Jeans* saw popularity more for the diversion they offered than for any literary or artistic merit that they possessed. Like few of his literary peers, Jack London was acutely aware of the desires and struggles of the so-called masses; he responded to the culture in the same manner they all did, and his own work was similarly influenced. In *Martin Eden*, his 1909 novel about a struggling proletarian writer, London presents a main character who says of the writing process “It ain’t in my class. But I’m goin’ to make it in my class” (*Martin Eden* 582). His speculative fiction drew inspiration from

the artistic, intellectual, physical world that grew out of the Gilded Age, and worked, in a similar fashion, to make it in the class of the people who could benefit from it the most.

To understand the importance and impact of Jack London's tales, and to establish both the level of influence they had upon the genre and the unique point of view through which London presented them, it is first important to gain an awareness of from where they came. London's first work of speculative fiction emerged in 1899, right at the beginning of his literary career; further speculative/fantasy pieces saw posthumous release after he died in November 1916. During this time, the speculative fiction that dominated the public imagination was typically of the outlandish, fanciful sort like *The Sky Pirate*, *Doctor Omega*, or H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*. London's stories, with their classical structure and naturalistic messages, helped to remold the speculative fiction landscape. They were heavily inspired by London's peers like Edwin Abbott and Edward Bellamy and his own literary heroes like Rudyard Kipling and Joseph Conrad. They responded, intelligently and aggressively, to the scientific, medicinal, and religious trends and ideas of the Gilded Age. Finally, they often served as reactionary pieces to the social, cultural, and political attitudes of the day; inside London's tales were searing repudiations of the way things were.

London tended to focus on the scientific and spiritual worlds in his SF by creating conflicts between characters, or groups of characters, with resolutely different belief systems. In "Planchette," the character of Chris smugly and impatiently dismisses his girlfriend Lute's concerns about spiritualism and the afterlife, much to her consternation. "It is all mystery as yet," he tells her. "The laws of it are yet to be formulated. This is simply unexplained phenomena" ("Planchette" 258). In "The Rejuvenation of Major Rathbone," the title character—freshly rejuvenated thanks to his nephew's experiments with elixirs, "is looked upon by a certain

portion of the village as a second Lazarus raised from the dead, as one who has almost seen God; while another portion of the village is equally set in its belief that he has “entered into a league with Lucifer” (“The Rejuvenation of Major Rathbone” 319). “The Shadow and the Flash” presents two warring college scientists who profess no less than their desire to conquer the world by cracking the code for invisibility through the latest vague scientific trends.

Much of London’s speculative work presented grim accounts of the futures people could expect if they continued to neglect the natural world. In “The Scarlet Plague,” Granser, the main character, speaks of how man “domesticated the serviceable animals, destroyed the hostile ones, and cleared the land of its wild vegetation,” only to watch the world crumble thanks to the ensuing, mysterious virus; “all man’s toil upon the planet was just so much foam,” Granser laments (“The Scarlet Plague” 323). A similar fate occurs to the characters in *Before Adam* and “The Strength of the Strong.” The narrator of *Before Adam* spends that novel’s final passages describing the wholly uninhabitable world that now surrounds him, an area of “bleak headlands” that “heaves and sighs with internal agitations” (*Before Adam* 221). In “The Strength of the Strong,” Long Beard also resides in a disheartening wasteland, and is haunted by the realization that it is a wasteland of his people’s own making. “We were a foolish crowd . . .” he says, “in fear of each other all the time” and unable to correct the damage because they “did not know the secret of strength” (“The Strength of the Strong” 530).

In his SF allegories, London also revealed a toxic racism and xenophobia that spoke, intriguingly and painfully, of many of the predominant mindsets of the time. “The Red One” is awash with repugnant language, as native characters are described as “grinning and chattering monkey-men . . . bestial of appearance” and the woman who would become the main character’s mate is elaborately introduced as “unbeautiful a prototype of a woman as he . . . had ever gazed

upon” (“The Red One” 266). London’s presentation of the people of China, in “The Unparalleled Invasion,” is no less offensive in its description of the Chinese as “mental aliens” and its statements like “there is no way to communicate Western ideas to the Chinese mind” (“The Unparalleled Invasion” 536). Such details not only conveyed Jack London’s troublesome beliefs, but also the beliefs that were held by many people of this era. In many ways, both positive and negative, the genre of speculative fiction unencumbered London. The writers by whom he was influenced, and the mindsets that he wanted to satirize or renounce, gave him more than inspiration: they deepened his purpose. Despite the fact that it remains a comparatively lesser-known and lesser-explored aspect of his legacy, Jack London’s speculative fiction was the product of a very specific place and time in the literary world. Its existence should be viewed as a significant turning point within that place and time.

CHAPTER 2

“WHAT SHALL I BE WHEN I LIVE AGAIN?”: FAITH AND REASON IN JACK LONDON’S SPECULATIVE FICTION

In Paul Malmont’s 2009 novel *Jack London in Paradise*, the character Jack London has a heated exchange with Hobart Bosworth, his antagonist, during a sparring match. “I read *The Star Rover* on my way here,” Bosworth goads. “I didn’t get it. Astral projection? That seems so au courant. Are you courting the cafe society?”

“I wouldn’t expect you to understand,” London responds.

“Sending him back to the Crucifixion? As if you all of a sudden believe in Jesus Christ? It smacked of pandering.”

“It’d make a helluva picture, wouldn’t it?” London asks, striking his opponent with a final jab. (Marmont 126)

Malmont’s disposable novel, which sketches a thoroughly fictitious portrait of London circa 1915, intimates that he wrote his stories as a means to support his lifestyle and gave them little thought beyond that. A deeper look at London’s speculative output quickly undermines such a theory, though. It is certainly possible that London composed much of his work with the thought of painting “a helluva picture,” but the picture that he ultimately painted was a unique and volatile one, of the American society emerging from the Gilded Age and coming to grips with the abundance of fast-arriving changes, and trying to evolve along with the rest of the civilized world. This depiction of America is particularly pertinent in works like *The Star Rover*, “The Relic of the Pliocene,” “The Eternity of Forms,” “When the World Was Young,” “Planchette,” and *Before Adam*, in which London addresses organized religion, faddish pseudoscience, and emergent technological innovations through characters like Darrell Standing

and James Ward, and situations like séances and symbolic prehistoric warfare. Indeed, much of London's speculative fiction attempted to make sense of this chaotic time and place in a way that his non-fiction and adventure tales often did not, typically by literalizing—and parodying—the anxious yet reticent mindset that prevailed during this era, and which contrasted sharply with London's own increasingly disillusioned view of humanity at the dawn of the twentieth century.

The Star Rover, the novel to which the character London and his fictitious nemesis refer in the above passage, was published in 1915. The twentieth century, and the preponderance of technological innovations that came along with it, was still young, strange, and mysterious. The Gilded Age, that culturally vital, philosophically experimental era in American history when modernity forced its way into day-to-day existence, was drawing to a close and giving way to the Progressive Era, a comparatively intimidating time of strictness, reform, and steadfast adherence to reason (Cashman 9). The turn of the twentieth century was one of the most tumultuous and transformative times in American history, and *The Star Rover*, in documenting the mindset of a perpetually nervous convicted criminal who escapes the uncertain present by essentially willing himself back into the past, encapsulated a great deal of what made it so.

The main character and narrator of London's tale is Darrell Standing, a college professor serving life imprisonment for the murder of a colleague. Standing spends the first few chapters of *The Star Rover* rambling impatiently to the reader about his crime—the motive for which he refuses to provide—and his mistreatment at the hands of his corrupt guards. He contradicts himself—first stating that he is not going to be hanged for his crimes, then saying that he is—and his tone shifts continually, from delusional to self-pitying to conniving, cementing his thorough unreliability as a narrator. “I am Darrell Standing. They are going to take me out and hang me pretty soon,” he blurts at his story's outset, in the simple, direct language one might associate

with a career criminal (*The Star Rover* 390). Moments later, though, Standing has taken on the florid, regal tones of an impetuous aristocrat: “As I lay there and listened to the . . . idle chattering of pain-addled wits,” he states, “somehow, vaguely reminiscent, it seemed to me that somewhere, sometime, I had sat in a high place, callous and proud, and listened to a similar chorus of moaning and groaning” (392). The effect Standing’s language provides is one of disorientation; he comes across as a confused, addled schizophrenic: a character uneasily poised on the precipice of two significant historical eras.

When the guards ultimately place Standing in solitary confinement and fit him with a painful torture device dubbed “the jacket,” their behavior does not seem all that extreme, despite his desperate protestations to the contrary. “I learned to suffer passively,” Standing whines ostentatiously about his predicament; “it is no easy trick to keep the brain in such serene repose that it is quite oblivious to the throbbing, exquisite complaint of some tortured nerve” (*The Star Rover* 389). As *The Star Rover* moves into its middle section, and Standing’s torture persists, his voice and demeanor take on a different, eerily clinical timbre, and he adapts a specific strategy by which to endure his suffering: he begins re-experiencing his past lives.

Standing’s initial foray into a separate plane of existence is benign enough: a basic, pleasant mental jaunt through the meadows and pastures of his youth. Soon enough, however, he is traipsing through space itself; and after that, he journeys back to medieval France to take part in a bloody sword fight, becomes the first white man to enter the kingdom of Korea, crosses paths with Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem, and spends some time as a primitive man in the Paleolithic era. “I have been growing, developing, through incalculable myriads of millenniums,” Standing insists. “All these experiences of all these lives, and of countless other lives, have gone to the making of the soul-stuff or the spirit-stuff that is I” (426). Standing’s

past-life recollections increasingly grow more vivid, more filled with detail, more intense-- notably, he also becomes more focused, less agitated, and less resistant to being fitted with the jacket, appearing excited for the opportunity to engage in another of his regressions. "Far back beyond the first men," he effuses, "were fear and fearlessness, love, hatred, anger, all the emotions, growing, developing, becoming the stuff that was to become men" (463). Standing's voice begins to take on the becalmed earnestness of a zealot, submerging in whimsy and hyperbole, emphasizing his successful divorce from the grim reality of his situation. "Like any boy, I had been haunted by the other beings I had been at other times," he muses, sounding less like a death row inmate than an adventurer (391). Even in *The Star Rover's* final moments, Standing is still babbling about his enduring spirit and multiple incarnations, merrily wondering what form he will take in his next life. He ends the story as a character who, in his resolute refusal to deal with, or even substantially acknowledge, his inevitable end and ultimate irrelevance, represents those who still stood in denial of many of the scientific breakthroughs, and spiritual repudiations, that came along with the departure of the Gilded Age.

London declares Darrell Standing's unreliability as the narrator of *The Star Rover* early on, not only by providing him with abundant fevered, hostile, contradictory monologues, but also by having him speak worshipfully of Stainton Moses, the infamously fraudulent spiritualist and medium who gained some notoriety in the late 1800's, and Colonel Albert de Rochas, the parapsychologist who spent the bulk of the Gilded Age toying with the concept of hypnosis and attempting to legitimize the occult. "I was convinced," London has Standing proclaim, "that Stainton Moses had, in previous lives, been those personalities that . . . seemed to possess him," and that de Rochas "had penetrated backward through time to the ancestors of his subjects" via hypnosis (396). London presents Standing as an absurd contrast to the scientific and

philosophical ideas of the late nineteenth century—a relic of a former era, stubbornly clinging onto fanciful and archaic conceits like hypnotism, past life regression, and communication with the dead, while willfully, and contentedly, ignoring the infinitely more sensible technological advancements springing up around him.

Darrell Standing brings *The Star Rover* to a close by stating his belief that “the stuff of life is plastic” and doubting his own ability to be skeptical about what he sees, hears, and experiences during his regressions (401). How important is skepticism? What is the stuff of life? How reliable, in the end, is the human mind? There were few speculative fiction writers of this era who brought to their turn-of-the-century writing the careful, wary distrust of human nature that Jack London did. This time, this place, and this genre proved to comprise a perfect fit for his progressive ideas and his stylistic proclivities. Americans were experiencing what Charles William Calhoun, in *The Gilded Age: Perspectives on the Origins of Modern America* (2007), dubbed “cultural trauma,” in which “the basic elements of American society—its political institutions, economy, and social structure—were in disarray” (Calhoun 47). These people often found themselves clinging to spirituality, tradition, and routine as a form of comfort during this tumultuous and transitional era. London remained perpetually impatient with any mindset or attitude that resisted the changes wrought by the Gilded Age. “It’s a great thing, this coming to believe that the universe can continue to exist . . . without the perpetuation of one’s own individuality,” London’s widow Charmain reports him saying in her biography *The Book of Jack London* (1921). “If people could come to realize the utter absurdity, logically, of the finite contemplating the infinite!” (C. London 286). The philosophy of Charles Darwin, which was at its most prevalent near the dawn of the Gilded Age, emphasized life’s accidental origins and mankind’s inherent need to survive at all costs; Jack London’s speculative fiction dissuaded

people from attaching themselves to any burgeoning belief system that attempted to suggest otherwise.

In the third edition of his exhaustive *America in the Gilded Age* (1993), Sean Dennis Cashman rather ominously situates the Gilded Age roughly between two presidential assassinations: those of Abraham Lincoln and William McKinley. Cashman also characterizes the era as a time in which society became “obsessed with invention, industrialization, incorporation, immigration, and, later, imperialism” (Cashman 4). The U.S., in its adolescence, was enduring an experimental phase, cycling through a multitude of ideas, fads, and innovations in search of something that stuck, something that could result in an improved, more prosperous way of life. Cashman characterizes the typical Gilded Age American as confused and bitter, but also hopeful, and more than a little starry-eyed (7-8). Scientists were investigating elixirs, alchemy, and radical forms of therapy; theologians were exploring concepts like Christian Science and the Social Gospel. People were grabbing at what ideas best comforted them, and best pointed them towards the hope that they craved.

The Gilded Age saw the onset of the Third Great Awakening, that period of American religious awareness when religion and social activism came together and spawned what would become known as the Social Gospel. In *A Consuming Faith: The Social Gospel and Modern American Culture* (2001), Susan Curtis describes this movement as one that “bolstered the age-old demand for individual regeneration . . . [and] did not let the saved languish in smug self-satisfaction while the ills of society kept others from salvation” (Curtis 2). It was a form of Protestantism that took care to address the physical and emotional needs of its practitioners in addition to the spiritual, and it demanded a level of *altruism*, of social responsibility, from all those who purported to be a part of it. Curtis points out how people who were “raised to believe

in individualism, self-restraint, domesticity, liberalism, and moral free agency found themselves in the late nineteenth century in a world that did not sustain their beliefs,” and established a more culturally inclusive creed, both to alleviate their fears about this world and to address the earthly problems that might conceivably delay the coming of paradise (8). This evolution of modern religion proved appealing to those, like Jack London, whose philosophies tended more towards the socialist than the spiritual.

In his essay “‘What Would Jesus Do?’: Practical Christianity, Social Gospel Realism, and the Homiletic Novel” (2006), Gregory S. Jackson describes the outpouring of homiletic texts that accompanied the rise of the Social Gospel movement and found fault with Christianity’s “complacency in the face of human want” (Jackson 644). Christians of this era were struggling with “enervating doubts about religion’s relevance in an age of industry, mechanization, and scientific advancement” (642). Jack London and many of his peers produced works of fiction that spoke to these doubts. In so doing, Jackson argues, these writers made Christ’s Biblical trials more immediately relatable, effectively modernizing the Christ story and paralleling it with the need for modern social and political reform. In his professional life, Jack London labored to keep his own religious beliefs largely private, but he recognized the Social Gospel’s value as a driving force behind much of his socialist fiction, and he used works like *The Star Rover* to codify his distaste for a religious system that tended often to recoil from those who would benefit from it the most. Darrell Standing’s dismissal, near *The Star Rover*’s conclusion, of heaven as “passing fluxes, vexed with star driftage as the earth is by the drifts of men,” reads like nothing other than a curt dismissal of traditional religion’s cold dispassion (*The Star Rover* 299). “I have worshiped the sun and the dark,” Standing says, “the husked grain as the parent of life. I have worshiped Sar, the Corn Goddess. And I have worshiped Sea Gods and River Gods and Fish

Gods” (299). Standing counts off the different ways he has worshiped throughout his many lives and acknowledges, in his final hours, that his zeal to seek out the latest religious fad led to his neglect of what makes a man: the desire, and the willingness, to “fight best and die best and live best for what we love” (296). It was his neglect of the social, selfless tenets of Christianity that placed him on the path toward his downfall.

Mary Hunter Austin, a fellow naturalist and chronicler of the early twentieth century working class, utilized a similar approach in her 1915 novel *The Man Jesus: Being a Brief Account of the Life and Teaching of the Man of Nazareth*. Austin’s slim text serves as a more human account of the historic Jesus, devoting a great deal of space to the smaller-scale difficulties that he encounters while trying to preach and unify his disciples. “Jesus did not invent the phrase Kingdom of Heaven,” Austin speculates as she goes into detail about his early teachings, “what he did contrive . . . was to give it entirely new meanings” (43). London admired Austin’s approach and corresponded with her about it, referring in one of his letters to *The Star Rover*, which he unironically dubbed his own “Christ novel” (qtd. in Campbell 9). In her article “‘Have you Read my Christ Story?’: Mary Austin’s *The Man Jesus* and London’s *The Star Rover*” (2012), Donna Campbell connects the two books, making particular note of the way London rendered Jesus’s persecution recognizably modern: “a representative body, in the main, well-intentioned, manipulated by a group within the group whose spring of action was illegitimate profit” (Campbell 10). Such detail, Campbell opines, could easily be construed as a dismissal of the small-mindedness of the church prior to the Social Gospel influence (10).

Campbell describes the care that both London and Austin took to craft Christ stories that primarily unfold without the expected mystical or spiritual elements: in the section of *The Star Rover* that occurs during the crucifixion and offers Pontius Pilate as a major character, Ragnar

Lodbrog (the Norse soldier who is Darrell Standing's stand-in/previous incarnation in this instance) is drawn to Christ through the power of his words and the force of his charisma, not through any miracles that he might deign to perform (Campbell 12). A follower of the Old Norse religion, Ragnar is eager, at a moment's notice, to tell boozy tales of the glories that await him in Valhalla, and seems quite satisfied and content in his beliefs; he scoffs at the Christian idea of heaven, with its promises of "unending summer, with the year at the ripe for the fruits and flowers and growing things," as "a place for weaklings and eunuchs and fat sobbing shadows of men" (*The Star Rover* 227). Jesus only drifts through the periphery of Ragnar's section of *The Star Rover*, and never speaks directly; Ragnar comes to know and respect him by reputation, through the reactions he creates in his followers. Ragnar is initially careful to hold Jesus at a remove, referring to him as "this Jesus" or "this fisherman;" it is not until the crucifixion that Jesus and Ragnar lock eyes and Ragnar reports that he was "soothed and satisfied, and was without bewilderment . . . the serenity of Jesus in the heart of the tumult and pain became my serenity" (245). Ragnar's allegiance to Jesus grows out of the latter's activism and desire to spread salvation through deeds—his adherence, basically, to the tenets that the followers of the Social Gospel upheld. Thus, Jack London's fictitious depiction of Jesus Christ, in a tale about reincarnation and past-life regression, serves as an eloquent and ultimately moving stylistic representation of both London's socialist views of Christianity, and of the Social Gospel, itself.

The same year that *The Star Rover* saw publication, London also composed the introduction to Upton Sinclair's collection *The Cry for Justice: An Anthology of the Literature of Social Protest*. London introduces this story compilation with such heartfelt passion that his words could almost qualify as a Social Gospel sermon. He calls on his readers to "serve the needs of groping, yearning humans who seek to discern truth and justice amid the dazzle and

murk of the thought-chaos of the present-day world” (Introduction i). London goes on to praise “the gospel of service” before concluding with the pronouncement that “he who serves all, best serves himself” (i). This mentality, which encouraged downtrodden workers to transcend their grim conditions through acts of selflessness, connected with the shifts in Social Gospel teachings that occurred during the turn of the century. In “The Social Gospel and the Progressive Era” (2009), Bradley W. Bateman describes the evolution of the Social Gospel from a belief that “allowed some people to see the dislocations of industrialism as the necessary weeding out of the weak and unfit” to one that preached “that if American society were shown the sins of industrialism, they would repent and build a more just social order” through altruism (Bateman n.p.). London, earnestly advocating a call for “so simple a remedy, merely service,” aligns himself with this doctrine (Introduction i). Social Gospel provided his writing not only with thematic resonance, but a means for him to reconcile his staunchly humanist, anti-capitalist beliefs.

Prior to the Social Gospel movement’s popularity, one of the more popular religious mindsets of the Gilded Age was that of the Christian Scientist—predictably, perhaps, it was a mindset that London regarded sardonically, as worthy of ridicule. Spearheaded by the teachings of Mary Baker Eddy, whose book *Science and Health* (1875) is still considered the religion’s central text, Christian Science achieved its peak popularity as the twentieth century dawned, and at least in this early incarnation, it fit smoothly into the Gilded Age’s custom of turning a blind eye to the social and spiritual ills of the time. Christian Science, based on the notion that the material world is only an illusion, encourages the eschewal of traditional medicinal practices, and strenuously discourages any type of negative thought, because of the harmful, potentially debilitating power such thought transmits (Gottschalk 21). London viewed the religion as

virtually incomprehensible. “Christian Science,” he stated in one of his private letters, “is practically all *deductive*, and what is deduced is deduced from unfounded, unproved, dogmatic assertions, such as ‘Can no being be, etc.’ Deductions from the conclusion of such a fallacious and henidical syllogism are no more to be trusted than the ravings of delirium” (*Letters* 721). London’s “The Eternity of Forms,” a short story that initially appeared as part of the collection *The Turtles of Tasman* in 1916, serves as a rather sophisticated critique of Christian Science in the guise of a Gothic speculative/horror yarn.

The tale unspools as an increasingly panicked interior monologue in the vein of Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart,” with a narrator who tries to convince himself that he *hasn’t* killed his own brother, and that his brother’s ghost *isn’t* impassively watching him from a chair across the room. The narrator tries to forestall his impending descent into madness by dwelling upon the theological debates he and his brother would often have, and he regards his brother’s dedication to the work of William Paley as a symbol of weakness. “It was childish,” he sniffs, referring to his brother’s admiration for Paley’s 1802 book *Natural Theology*. “I had not dreamed he could be so immature” (“The Eternity of Forms” n.p.). William A. Dembski, in *Intelligent Design: The Bridge Between Science & Theology* (1999), stresses the importance of Paley’s writing in general, and *Natural Theology* in particular, to the Christian Science movement. Paley held a profoundly idealistic view of man and nature as manifestations of the divine, and asserted that people can exercise dominion over their muscles and organs by simply acknowledging them as examples of the works of God (Dembski 59). In “The Eternity of Forms,” Paley’s so-called watchmaker analogy, a theological argument that states that all things of a complex design—a watch, a person, the universe—prove, by default, the need for an intelligent designer, is curtly brushed aside as “a fallacious Christian Science syllogism” (“The Eternity of Forms” n.p.). “I

laughed at the unseen world,” the tale’s narrator boasts, casting himself in his debates with his brother as a grounded skeptic who believes that death is the end, and parrots many of London’s own recorded beliefs about the folly of Christian Science. “Only the real was real . . . what one did not perceive, was not, could not be . . . ‘Can no being be?’ he demanded in reply” (n.p.). At one point, the narrator brings the story to a halt so that he can deliver a monologue that makes his philosophical stance perfectly clear:

I assert, with Hobbes, that it is impossible to separate thought from matter that thinks. I assert, with Bacon, that all human understanding arises from the world of sensations. I assert, with Locke, that all human ideas are due to the functions of the senses. I assert, with Kant, the mechanical origin of the universe, and that creation is a natural and historical process. I assert, with Laplace, that there is no need of the hypothesis of a creator. And, finally, I assert, because of all the foregoing, that form is ephemeral.

Forms pass. Therefore we pass (n.p.).

Thus, the narrator immerses himself in reason, portraying himself as a disciple of everyone from Hobbes to Laplace, flatly reciting and connecting their philosophies as a means of justifying his smug refusal to accept anything unusual or indefinable. He abstains from allowing himself to consider any new or original thoughts on the topic, judging them all as implicitly inferior to the assertions of the philosophical theorists of old. As tends to be customary in Gothic tales of this ilk, however, his comfortable belief system is ripped asunder by the story’s end, and his brother’s taciturn, implacable specter forces him to admit that “there is an unseen world,” and to concur meekly that “if the stuff of life can create, then it is fair to assume that there can be a He who created the stuff of life” (n.p.). The narrator ends “The Eternity of Forms” struck immobile by his brother’s ghost, seated in his study chair, paralyzed by fear and awe. Jack London warned, in

one of his correspondences, that “rabidness against religion is one of the proofs of [a brain’s] misuse . . . life is only so long, and to fly against gods and devils is only permissible for very young men who have but received their manumission from superstition” (*Letters* 168). The final image of “The Eternity of Forms” is an example of such crippling rabidness at its most pathetic. Crucially, however, London holds the tale’s narrator at fault not for refuting the notion of an afterlife, but for smugly dismissing any new manner of thinking outside the familiar. “Only the real was real, I contended,” he insists, “and what one did not perceive, was not, could not be” (“The Eternity of Forms” n.p.). “All his days, down to to-day, man has lived in a maze,” he continues. “He has never seen the light” (n.p.). Despite his steady criticism of his fellow man, it is the narrator himself who is ultimately unable to see the light, or to perceive the supposedly imperceptible. He remains a relic of the Gilded Age, forced to come to terms with his own flawed ideas, quite literally unable to continue, or move forward.

Religious discourse in the Gilded Age frequently took on the form of conflict between reason and superstition. In much of his writing, London was careful to give credence to both sides of this debate, declaring that his “mode of thought, and the mode of thought of positive science, is to reason from fact to theory . . . go into the universe about you, and outside of you, in order to find yourself, and . . . reason *inductively*” (*Letters* 721). At one point, in correspondence with a particularly cynical admirer, he warned that one should “be not too quick to criticize others until God himself whispers in your ear that you are absolutely perfect and greater than Christ” (xxiv). His short story “Planchette” (1906) afforded London the opportunity to address the duality of this dogmatic argument in a more head-on, aggressive fashion, while delving again into Gothic storytelling tropes to construct a tale that deals directly with spirits, omens, and the afterlife.

The story's centerpiece is a stylized, almost comically overwrought séance, which serves as the backdrop for a heated series of discussions about science versus faith, the seen versus the unseen, and the natural world versus the mythological one. London introduces his readers to his two main characters—a pair of idyllic twentysomething lovers named Lute and Chris—and immediately emphasizes their diametrically opposed personalities. Lute is the starry-eyed, superstitious type, sighing winsomely to her betrothed that he seems “to draw affection from all living things . . . it comes to you as it were your birthright” (“Planchette” 242). Chris, meanwhile, is pragmatic, condescending, and even gruff in his treatment of Lute, all but laughing in her face as she entrusts him with her opinions about good luck, coincidence, and the energy of the forests and fields around her. After a considerable amount of foreshadowing and building tension, the two of them decide to take part in a parlor game led by the mysterious Mrs. Grantly, an acquaintance of Lute's aunt, visiting from the East. Mrs. Grantly turns out to be a self-professed medium, and this parlor game turns out to be a séance, which amuses Chris, but which Lute regards with the utmost dread and seriousness.

As Lute's aunts and uncles gather around the Ouija board, Mrs. Grantly begins her efforts to make contact with the spiritual world. Chris volunteers to sit opposite her—“Some one always has to be the fool for the delectation of the rest,” Lute's aunt says—and the séance becomes an extended dialogue between Chris, the stubborn rationalist, and the fanciful, whimsical, ultimately menacing Mrs. Grantly (251). “There is the possibility of one mind unconsciously suggesting to another mind,” Mrs. Grantly insists to the room; Chris counters by pointing out that “the subconscious mind has yet to be discovered” (251). As Mrs. Grantly labors away behind the planchette, Chris has a calm, scientific rebuke for her every declaration, and his wry, blasé attitude towards the proceedings distresses Lute to no end. “Science may be

too dogmatic in its denial of the unseen,” she says. “The forces of the unseen, of the spirit, may well be too subtle, too sublimated, for science to lay hold of, and recognize, and formulate” (251).

Chris and Mrs. Grantly eventually come to a stalemate on the matter of communication with the afterlife; just as the room starts to grow unnerved, Chris’s façade looks as if it is beginning to crack, and Mrs. Grantly’s pronouncements grow ever more curious, Lute’s Uncle Robert steps in and shuts the activity down, announcing that Mrs. Grantly’s tactics “smack of mediaevalism” and waving off her chatter as “what I’d think Christian Science ought to sound like” (254). Further mention of the séance, the Ouija board, and Mrs. Grantly is shelved—but then London furnishes a twist ending, as Chris, while horseback riding with Lute on a canyon the next afternoon, topples to his death. Lute believes, of course, that Chris’s demise stems from his refusal to take seriously the ominous Mrs. Grantly and her mystical planchette; she blames “the spectral arm of her [late] father” for killing her lover (260). London, though, makes careful note of the dislodged “earth and small stones” on the curved road bed, and leaves open the possibility that Chris may have sealed his fate by simply riding his horse too near the canyon’s edge (260). The cause of Chris’s disturbingly sudden end may have been spiritual, it may have been natural, or it may even have been a combination thereof; to London, definite results are much less important than infinite possibilities. One of the defining traits of the Gilded Age was its emphasis on life’s abundant possibility and complexity. London helped to articulate all that uncertain complexity by placing it at the center of much of his speculative fiction.

In *The Emergence of Christian Science in American Religious Life* (1974), Stephen Gottschalk speculates that Christian Science’s enduring popularity, along with the resurgence of William Paley’s philosophies, can be attributed to its “strongly immanentist view of Deity,” one

that “adopted a refurbished version of the old doctrine of design and held, in the worlds of the popular slogan, that ‘evolution is God’s way of doing things’” (Gottschalk xxv-xxvi). That old doctrine, of course, had experienced some significant disruption in the late 1800’s, thanks to the findings and writings of Charles Darwin, whose view of evolution and depiction of nature in continuous conflict stirred up abundant controversy while also providing ideological inspiration to Jack London and many other writers of the time. In *On the Origin of Species* (1859), Darwin offered a shrewd, logical refutation of the Christian assertion that nature has remained the same since its commencement and exists in a perpetual state of harmony. He also dismantled Paley’s watchmaker analogy, something that he had been a proponent of in his youth:

The old argument of design in nature, as given by Paley, which formerly seemed to me so conclusive, fails, now that the law of natural selection has been discovered. We can no longer argue that, for instance, the beautiful hinge of a bivalve shell must have been made by an intelligent being, like the hinge of a door by man. There seems to be no more design in the variability of organic beings and in the action of natural selection, than in the course which the wind blows. Everything in nature is the result of fixed laws (Darwin 431).

Darwin’s teachings on evolution, on natural selection, and on what Herbert Spencer later termed “the survival of the fittest” thoroughly revitalized the creative world, even as they deeply disturbed the traditional religious community. Speculative fiction that addressed Darwin’s theories sprang up almost immediately. In 1872, Samuel Butler published *Erewhon*, a farcical novel that offers among its antagonists an armada of mechanical men that have essentially achieved sentience through natural selection. Edward Page Mitchell spent the 1870’s crafting short stories about evolved men. Jules Verne, in *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864), was

already treating Darwin's biological theories about the world's development as facts, implicitly superior to the Biblical stories of mankind's origins. The philosophies of Darwin and Spencer appeared in London's speculative fiction, as well, most obviously in "When the World Was Young," an examination of evolution and natural selection that also details the exploits of a monster on the loose in San Francisco's nighttime streets.

James Ward, the main character of "When the World Was Young," is a respectable San Francisco businessman by day and a prehistoric barbarian by night. His plight, as London depicts it, carries elements of werewolf fiction, but what differentiates this tale from works like Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* or Kipling's "The Mark of the Beast" is the main character's keen self-awareness, the fact that Ward's "two personalities were so mixed that they were practically aware of themselves and of each other all the time" ("When the World Was Young" (547). As reported by Franklin Walker in "Jack London's Use of Sinclair Lewis Plots" (1953), London is said to have purchased the plot for "When the World Was Young," along with a handful of other stories, from the young Sinclair Lewis, which might explain the tale's relative conventionality (a cursed man is able to overcome that curse through the mere act of willpower, abetted by a loyal woman), although London himself is credited with filling in the character details, as well as the provocative references to Darwinism that give the piece its flavor (Walker 63).

As crafted by London, the character of James Ward is a living, breathing, Darwinian example of what William Graham Sumner referred to as "the imp of nature . . . taught that all mankind lived under the inexorable law of the struggle for survival of the finest . . . of individuals fighting to win the means of subsistence from nature" (qtd. in Ancil n.p.). London describes the whiplash transformation of Ward from a nondescript "senior partner" of an ill-

defined firm into an animalistic, ferocious, wild-eyed, yellow-haired savage with muscles that “were knotted like fat snakes” (“When the World Was Young” 545). In his savage persona, Ward grumbles in an ancient Teutonic language and lopes around in pursuit of coyotes and other animals, plagued all the while by “a thousand voices whispering to him through the darkness” (541). The nature of Ward’s condition is never explained; he is simply presented as a Teuton who somehow lives again after thousands of years: physical evidence of Darwin’s theory of evolution.

The story’s conclusion arrives when Ward finally manages to shake off his affliction by overcoming a grizzly bear in combat. After beating the animal to death with a club while his aghast girlfriend watches, he experiences a pain as if “the soul of him were flying asunder,” and then James Ward the Teutonic barbarian disappears, replaced once and for all by James Ward the successful California businessman (546). London then proffers a ludicrous, tongue-in-cheek epilogue in which the terms “hero” and “bravery” are bandied about with regard to Ward’s legacy; no time is spent expanding on what that legacy might actually consist of, aside from running around the wilderness at night and occasionally battling forest animals.

Although “When the World Was Young” is, on its surface, a straightforward, pulpy, speculative adventure tale with elements of the fantastic, it is also darkly, absurdly humorous—London often seems all too aware of his story’s outlandishness. Describing the time that James Ward spent working on a Wyoming ranch, and the extreme intensity that he brought to the most menial of tasks, London states that Ward’s fellow ranch hands “would vastly prefer chumming with howling cannibals, gibbering lunatics, cavorting gorillas, grizzly bears, and man-eating tigers than with this particular young college product with hair parted in the middle” (548). Earlier, London treats Ward’s confrontation with a would-be robber as virtual slapstick, with the

aspiring thief hurtling fences and sprinting madly down the street in an attempt to escape the beast he has inadvertently awakened.

London's wit is often at its sharpest in his speculative works, like "When the World Was Young," that address the scientific and philosophical fads that existed during the Gilded Age. "The majority of the people who inhabit the planet Earth are bone-heads," he once declared, in correspondence with Mary Austin, and much of his writing displays that same resigned misanthropy (qtd. in Campbell 9). Much of it also displays his bemusement at the gullibility and short-sightedness of his fellow turn-of-the-century man, who resisted Darwin's logical and reasonable theories in favor of dubious concepts like theosophy and trendy quasi-scientific therapies like alchemy and somnambulism. When taking on the thorny spiritual ideas that were dominant in the late nineteenth century, London typically dug deep, constructing cerebral commentaries that treated subjects like Christian Science and the Social Gospel seriously while viewing them through a unique, socialistic critical prism and ensuring that the plots of his speculative works were never shortchanged. However, when he turned his literary eye towards the scientific whimsies and follies of his day and age, he tended to do so with an eyebrow cocked, adopting a much more caustic point of view, unafraid to be more explicit in his parody and abstract in his storytelling. "When the World Was Young" presents its readers with no straightforward plot *per se*; it simply follows James Ward around on his twilight Teutonic jaunts and offers him up as a symbol of the survival of the fittest taken to its extreme. London takes similar stylistic approaches in stories like "The Rejuvenation of Major Rathbone" and, especially, "A Relic of the Pliocene." He uses these works to parody the trends of the time, situating his hapless main characters inside an exaggerated miasma of misery and confusion and then implying that any real-life attempts to emulate them would produce the same results.

By way of example, “The Relic of the Pliocene” (1901) introduces one of London’s more interesting recurring characters, the obtuse explorer Thomas Stevens, and provides a rebuke to those who still refused to give any credence to Charles Darwin’s teachings. It is one of the most playful of London’s short stories: a sly adventure fantasy about a Yukon hunter’s battle with a prehistoric beast. Thomas Stevens is the character who vividly recounts his recent clash with a woolly mammoth, but, crucially, he is not the short story’s narrator; that task falls to a nameless fellow making camp at the edge of the Klondike, who is minding his own business one evening when Stevens strolls into his encampment, plops down in front of the fire, and—apropos of nothing—starts telling his bizarre tale. This story-inside-a-story structure enables London to halt Stevens’s narrative at several points so the narrator can interject and comment on the “lies” that he’s being told and the overall unbelievable nature of Stevens’s reminiscence. When the narrator attempts to inform him, calmly and evidentially, that woolly mammoths do not, and *cannot* exist any longer, Stevens remains unflappable, stubborn, determined to continue telling his fanciful story no matter how many holes the narrator punches in it. He smugly replies, “When I was a kid I saw a petrified watermelon. Hence, though mistaken persons sometimes delude themselves into thinking they are really growing or eating them, there are no such things as extant watermelons” (“A Relic of the Pliocene” 326). Like Chris in “Planchette,” the narrator eventually abandons his attempts at a rational counter-argument and relents, allowing Stevens to tell his tale, no matter how suspect it might seem. In the language that follows, Stevens seems to sense the narrator’s disbelief, and implies that indulging the occasional extravagance might make man’s existence a trifle easier. “Many’s the time I’ve laughed about it since, but at the time it was no laughing matter,” Stevens boasts of his adventure. “Life’s full of disappointments, and rightly so. Meat is best after a famine, and a bed softer after a hard trail” (327). By the time

Stevens has concluded his tale, his earnestness and enthusiasm have succeeded in snuffing the narrator's own skepticism about the existence of giant elephants in the frozen North.

Initially, one might be hard-pressed to find any sort of character similarity between James Ward, from "When the World Was Young," and Thomas Stevens. But, aside from serving as blunt, comic symbols of Darwinism and the reactions that Darwinism inspired, they also stand as two examples of the biological concept of atavism. Another scientific tenet that gained traction in the late nineteenth century, emerging as a response to the theories of evolution and natural selection, atavism refers to any trait—physical, emotional, psychological—that occurs in a person and can be ascribed to his or her ancestors. For example, if a man suddenly and abberationally sprouts hair all over his body, atavism attributes it to nothing other than the relative hirsuteness of his antecedent. Thus, when James Ward assumes the form and personality of a prehistoric barbarian, speaks in a dead language, and alleges to be guided by a thousand ghostly voices, or when Thomas Stevens speaks of resorting to his primitive hunter instincts during his months-long battle with the mammoth, "eating jerked meat and salmon berries on the run" and apparently only napping for a few seconds at a time, these men are acting atavistically (326). Their behavior, in other words, should not be regarded as alarming or unusual: it is in their genes.

Atavism, as it was defined in the Gilded Age, grew out of the rise of biological determinism that occurred in the final decades of the 1800's and became a prominent pseudo-scientific fad during this time period. Dana Seitler, in *Atavistic Tendencies: The Culture of Science in American Modernity* (2008), describes the unsettling way "scientific taxonomies and their violent wrenching of certain social practices into binary categories of abnormal and normal became the central method of human science in its attempts to change the social world" (Seitler

100). Thanks to the efforts of self-professed experts in atavism like Cesare Lombroso (who concocted the heinous notion of “criminal atavism”), people with certain physical or mental anomalies were shunned, persecuted, and regarded as modern savages. Lombroso’s “Theory of Crime” flatly stated that “the born criminal . . . is essentially an atavistic anomaly, reproducing the physical and psychological characteristics of remote ancestors” (Ellwood 719-720). This theory heavily implied that those with mental or physical defects—or those with unusual or exotic backgrounds—were no less than deviants in waiting. Gothic horror writers, perhaps predictably, seized upon the eerie, implicitly otherworldly aspects of atavism as atmosphere for their stories. In his 2003 book *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History’s Nightmares*, Robert Mighall discusses how “primitive ancestry . . . can be relocated in the modern individual in the midst of civilization . . . [and] here, in the body and brain of the individual is a new domain for history, its anomalies and disruptions, and here is a new terrain for Gothic fictional representation” (Mighall 145). Gilded Age writers recognized this new terrain, and atavism showed up as a plot point in everything from Stoker’s *Dracula* to Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to many of Robert Louis Stevenson’s works.

Although atavism was a popular subject in Gothic fiction, Jack London was virtually the lone writer who discussed the subject at length in speculative fiction. Many of his tales dealt with it at least glancingly: not only “When the World Was Young” and “A Relic of the Pliocene,” but also “Planchette”—when Lute experiences “the instinctive fear that arose in her--man’s inheritance from the wild and howling ages when his hairy, apelike prototype was afraid of the dark and personified the elements into things of fear,” she is behaving atavistically, even if she does not recognize it (“Planchette” 249). London’s novel *Before Adam* (1907) takes atavism as one of its subjects; the word first appears in the story’s third paragraph, and the narrator refers

to it often as he muses wistfully about “these prehistoric memories of mine” and draws repeated comparisons between his life and that of his primeval, cave-dwelling ancestor. “Evolution was the key,” he stresses. “It gave the explanation, gave sanity to the pranks of this atavistic brain of mine that, modern and normal, harked back to a past so remote as to be contemporaneous with the raw beginnings of mankind” (*Before Adam* 21). In describing the slow-burning conflict among three opposing Neanderthal tribes—the Cave People, the Tree People, and the Fire People—London employs instinct as the prime motivating tool behind every character’s actions: their unpredictable, unusual behavior is explained as the product of that which was bred in them.

The passive, simple, peace-loving Cave People, who refer to themselves as the Folk, are the protagonists of *Before Adam*. London accentuates their good humor, curiosity, and passionate devotion to family and friends, and contrasts it with the raw aggression of the other two tribes, particularly Red-Eye, a former member of the Tree People, cast out from his tribe due to his loathsome behavior, who is perhaps one of the most detestable villains in early twentieth century literature. Red-Eye is a taunting sadist who abuses his many wives and kills mainly for the fun of it; the Folk deem him “an atavism . . . a monster of cruelty . . . the great discordant element in our horde” (43). London devotes chapter upon chapter of *Before Adam* to colorful descriptions of Red-Eye’s over-the-top savagery, like ripping men’s faces off with his bare hands and stalking women with a tireless lasciviousness. The fact that Red-Eye simply disappears from the proceedings during the novel’s calamitous final confrontation, denying the reader any sort of catharsis, remains one of London’s most curious stylistic choices. Red-Eye, the novel’s most vividly developed supporting character, as well as its ostensible antagonist, vanishes instead of participating in any sort of conventional literary climax, and *Before Adam* concludes with the annihilation of the Cave People by their rivals. In this case, Darwinism is presented as a

destructive force; those who value life, family, and relationships suffer at the expense of those who know only war, violence, and domination, and the superiors in this prehistoric society are so fit because they have been cruel enough to crush their enemies beneath them. Even more pointedly, the narrative arc that the Cave People undergo evokes the finality and thudding inevitability of life, where journeys regularly end abruptly, bleakly, and often unsatisfyingly.

In his essay “Jack London and Evolution: From Spencer to Huxley” (2004), Lawrence Berkove analyzes London’s treatment of Darwinism in his fiction and points out that the notion of the survival of the fittest “is always relative to variable and random external conditions, and Darwinist thought denies perfection because evolution is, by definition, a state of constant change that is forever adapting to those varying external conditions” (Berkove 252). Berkove credits the teachings of Herbert Spencer with solidifying the theories of Darwinism, the survival of the fittest, and beneficial atavism in London’s mind, and enabling him to reconcile his basic belief in Darwin’s principles with his own humanist “conviction that individuals and morality were important” (244). When he situated the ideas of Darwin and Spencer inside his own writing, London addressed “the struggle for existence and the randomness of evolutionary agency,” but he also “implied ironically that survival of the fittest is insufficient itself to account for the world we know” (248). *Before Adam*, in its structure, its action, and its logical yet dispiriting climax, serves as a dramatic example of London’s overall ambivalence towards some aspects of Darwinism, and his means of unpacking that ambivalence in fictive form.

Ambivalence, finally, is a term that can be used to characterize a great deal of Jack London’s speculative fiction. “When the World Was Young” maintains a sense of ambivalence as to whether the figure of James Ward—businessman by day, atavism by night—should be viewed tragically, comically, or heroically. Darrell Standing’s past-life regressions in *The Star*

Rover might be genuine, delusional, or merely desperate flights of escapism—instinctive “fight or flight” reactions against his inevitable, slowly approaching end. Skeptical characters in “Planchette” and “The Eternity of Forms” brush up against the spirit world and suffer grim fates that may or may not be attributable to their own mockery of the unknown, or their repudiations of the idea that the past, or the future, might hold sway over the present. *Before Adam* is an illustration of Spencer’s “survival of the fittest” theory that leaves the reader wondering if the fittest really *have* survived. In “A Relic of the Pliocene,” Thomas Stevens speaks wonderingly of his encounter with the last surviving member of an ancient race—then goes into elaborate detail about how he tricked, trapped, and systematically butchered that survivor, in much the same way as one of his caveman forebears would have butchered that creature’s ancestors. The Gilded Age was an ambivalent time, to be sure, particularly in the fields of science and religion. Like virtually everyone else, Jack London was uncertain of what the future held, and wary of the fads and philosophies that sprang up persistently around him and promised to help his advancement into the twentieth century be a smoother one. He kept faith, however, that “man’s ageless heritage of strength and cunning” would keep him afloat throughout the metaphorical storms that might accompany the turn of this new century (Giles 26). In “Beneficial Atavism in Frank Norris and Jack London” (1969), James R. Giles paints a biographical portrait of London as a man intensely distrustful of industrialization, who has “seen with his own eyes men from an urban civilization suddenly faced with the necessity of surviving, often through brutality and force, in a wilderness environment” (20). Not only did this perspective infuse his speculative fiction, it also fueled his attitude towards those who feared the oncoming era or clung desperately to the ideals of the past all because they were uncomfortable with some of the new philosophies and scientific turning points.

“The Rejuvenation of Major Rathbone” (1899) is about a pair of such men, Dover Wallingford and a nameless narrator—two Frankenstein-influenced mad scientists, weaned on the science and chemical teachings of the nineteenth century, who attempt to play God and end up descending into a frantic morass of elixirs, lymphs, induced vomiting, and revived zombies that aspire to run for public office. One of London’s most entertaining pieces, “The Rejuvenation of Major Rathbone” builds into a berserk farce, but what the story is truly about is regret: over lost loves, lost opportunities, and lost time. Both scientists are aware of the changes that the Gilded Age has wrought, and even act as if they see the benefits of those changes—the story begins in the middle of a monologue in which chemistry is praised for its ability to “substitute fact for fancy . . . [turn] probability into reality, and from the ideal . . . fashion the real” (“The Rejuvenation of Major Rathbone” 318-319). But, as they work to come up with a life-prolonging serum, their actions seem motivated less by any noble scientific causes and more by their own self-interested desires to achieve notoriety and make something of themselves—to leave a mark before their time has passed. In their desperate nostalgia, their wildly uninformed scientific theories, and their deluded insistence of their own altruism, they could be cut from the same cloth as Darrell Standing or Thomas Stevens—or most any other American of that time frame, peering over the precipice into the new century. “What is life?” they ask each other as their adventure begins, but then they never stop scheming long enough to answer (317).

Dover Wallingford’s uncle Max, the titular rejuvenated major, takes advantage of his resurgent energy to become mayor of his small town, consider a run for Congress, resolve a worker’s strike, and volunteer to fight in the Spanish-American War. When Dover and the narrator reach the conclusion that Max needs to be subdued, the solution that these two supposedly brilliant scientists come up with is to get him a girlfriend, with the hope that she will

distract him and occupy enough of his time to keep him out of war, politics, and labor negotiations. It is a disarmingly sweet—if zany—denouement, even if its lasting effectiveness may be in question. The whimsy displayed in the story’s final moments betrays the author’s genuine, protective affection for this bumbling group of characters he has created. London once boasted of his “unfailing love of humanity bonded to an essential love of life itself,” and despite his occasional tendency towards misanthropy, and his unapologetic opinion that most people are “bone-heads,” there were times in his fiction when he appeared optimistic almost in spite of himself (*Letters* xxiv).

Alex Kershaw, in *Jack London: A Life* (1984), states that “what animated Jack London’s life, above all, was a hope that one day, poverty and social injustice would decrease, and . . . that humanism would, one day, triumph” (Kershaw 10). Kershaw’s biographical portrait of London is as an impassioned mixture of the pugnacious and the epicurean, a man who could argue his way into a physical altercation at a socialist meeting and then, a short time later, take part in the local nightlife and craft thoughtful, effusive letters to his admirers and acquaintances. London’s own writing backs up this depiction. “Two men who are kind to each other,” he once said, “can shake the skies. A thousand men, criticizing each other, can produce nothing more than a madhouse, and an expense to the community that confines them” (*Letters* 23). Much of London’s speculative fiction was bleak in subject matter, and a great deal of it ended in tragedy or chaos, but what kept it vital was his love for the human spirit and all the multitudes that it contained. There existed the sense, in much of his writing, that it could easily have been London who authored Hemingway’s famous line from *For Whom the Bell Tolls*—the one about the world being a fine place, and worth fighting for.

It was in his speculative fiction that London could most sharply and meaningfully consider the turn-of-the-century beliefs about faith and reason and reconcile them with his own conflicted view of the human race. London wrote “The Rejuvenation of Major Rathbone” in 1899, directly at the dawn of the twentieth century. He was twenty-three, and at the end of this tale, his characters are still holding onto that faith, that “heritage of strength and cunning,” that carried many people through the Gilded Age and out the other side (Giles 26). As his work in the speculative fiction genre continued, however, with tales like “Planchette,” “When the World Was Young,” and “A Relic of the Pliocene,” his attitudes towards his characters and their predicaments grew more rueful and judgmental; his characters made it out the other side with decreasing frequency. He wrote *The Star Rover* in 1915, at the age of thirty-nine, with war looming over the country. Its ending was more tired than hopeful, more tragic than comic; Darrell Standing’s plight inspires no sense of relief, and very little in the way of sympathy.

Once, in correspondence with a reader who had written to him to complain about the downbeat ending of one of his short stories, London stated, “After having come through all the game of life, and of youth, at my present mature age of thirty-nine years, I am firmly and solidly convinced that the game is worth the candle” (“Five Letters to Aspiring Writers” 227). Just over a year after writing those words, London would be gone, having died a painful death brought on by his uremia. One cannot help but wonder of the paths he would have taken in his speculative fiction had he lived into the Roaring Twenties and beyond. How would London’s speculative fiction have looked in another decade? Would it have continued helping people to see the value of the rapidly evolving world around them? Would his speculative fiction have regained a sense of hope as the twentieth century progressed, or slid further and more pronouncedly into a state of despair? Would the game still have been worth the candle?

CHAPTER 3

“MEN WHO ARE SLAVES ARE NOT STRONG”: RACISM AND IMPERIALISM IN JACK LONDON’S SPECULATIVE FICTION

Near the end of his 1904 essay “The Yellow Peril,” Jack London makes this statement: “The menace to the Western world lies, not in the little brown man, but in the four hundred millions of yellow men should the little brown man undertake their management. The Chinese is not dead to new ideas; he is an efficient worker [and] makes a good soldier . . . under a capable management he will go far” (“The Yellow Peril” n.p.). At the end of London’s semi-autobiographical novel *The Mutiny of the Elsinore* (1914), the main character praises his family’s “fair-skinned, blue-eyed” characteristics before musing that “in our time we shall have trod on the faces of all peoples, disciplined them to obedience, taught them government, and dwelt in the palaces we have compelled them by the weight of our own right arms to build for us” (*Mutiny of the Elsinore* 149). In *Racial Lives: A Critical Biography*, Jeanne Campbell Reesman refers to a speech London gave near the end of his life, during which he proclaimed that the ideas of liberty, freedom and independence “are royal things that cannot be presented to, nor thrust upon, races and classes. If races and classes cannot rise up by their own strength of brain and brawn . . . they can never come to these royal possessions” (qtd. in *Racial Lives* 287).

As these examples show, Jack London’s racism cannot be denied. He was a writer whose works contained evocative detail and fierce empathy, but also conveyed and perpetrated a great many rancorous, painful stereotypes about racial subordination. Over the years, scholars have attempted to mount apologias or clarifications for London’s prejudices and primitive racial attitudes and viewpoints, but the toxicity of statements like those listed above is impossible to

justify, rationalize, or compartmentalize. He was a racist, even by the standards of his own time, and his racism was made all the more stinging and impactful by his written eloquence.

Some of the racism on display in London's work is stunning in its clumsiness and crudity, as when, in "Planchette," he has the character of Chris affect the exaggerated dialect of an African-American servant just to give his girlfriend, Lute, a quick chuckle ("Planchette" 240). Other instances are arguably well-intentioned yet frustratingly obtuse, like his almost poetic description--in *The Cruise of the Snark*--of Hawaiian surfers, during which he refers to them as brown gods (*The Cruise of the Snark* 78). In his essay "Jack London's Pacific World" (1983), Earle Labor equates the deplorably offensive depictions of native people in much of London's writing with the "sad historical fact . . . that many of the leading 'scientific' thinkers of [his] age embraced various doctrines of white supremacy, and that millions of decent Americans bought books which blatantly preached 'racial egotism' and taught their readers to 'despise the lesser breeds'" (Labor 214). Although it hardly makes his racism excusable, evidence does show that London was far from the lone writer who held and expressed these prejudices at the onset of the twentieth century. H.G. Wells, in *The Time Machine* (1895), was drawing crass comparisons between his fictitious race of Eloi and African immigrants. Edgar Rice Burroughs was beginning his successful series of *Tarzan* books, in which he merrily described the main character as "the killer of beasts and many black men" (Burroughs 116). As the new century dawned, segregation was in full force, race riots occurred frequently, and the Ku Klux Klan was still roughly a decade away from being depicted heroically in D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. The teachings of Social Darwinism remained a prevalent part of Western culture, except that scholars like Meredith Townsend and David Starr Jordan were pushing these ideas to often dangerous extremes with their emphases on the noxious concept of eugenics. This time period

was what Isiah Lavender, in *Race in American Science Fiction* (2011), called a time of “truly malicious” abuse of basic human rights (Lavender 47). Despite all of this, however, the presentation of race in much of Jack London’s speculative fiction was especially problematic, and carried with it a notable bluntness that made its sting all the more distasteful.

In her introduction to *Jack London’s Racial Lives: A Critical Biography* (2011), Jeanne Reesman addresses London’s closed-minded view of race and contrasts it to his many works that exposed class or racial injustice. In a short story like “The League of the Old Men,” published in 1902, London adopts the point of view of a Yukon Indian and takes the white man to task for the decimation of so many North American tribes, and the ruination of so much North American woodlands. Reesman claims that “London distinguished himself from other popular writers of the day--including fellow naturalists Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser--by bringing complex, three-dimensional nonwhite characters to the pages of mass market magazines and books” (Introduction 2). London’s awestruck accounts of Jack Johnson’s boxing matches, and his wistful 1913 letter in which he vows that “just as boys grow up, so the races of mankind will grow up and laugh when they look back upon their childish quarrels,” suggest the work of a man grappling with his own complicated racial beliefs (“Stranger Than Fiction” 75). Nonetheless, London’s own daughter, Joan, in her biography of her father, painted a portrait of Jack--near the end of his life, unhealthy, and miserable--upbraiding a Greek admirer who asked him about *The Mutiny of the Elsinore* by snapping “You have behaved towards me as any alleged modern Greek peddler has behaved towards the superior races” (qtd. in “The Quest That Failed” 54). There was no deathbed apology or renouncement of his past ways from Jack London. His daughter recalled his proclamation that he was “first of all a white man and only

then a socialist,” and it would seem that he was still of that mindset during his final days (qtd. in “The Quest That Failed” 54).

The depictions of, and interactions with, non-whites in London’s works of nonfiction and adventure writing remain deeply troubling, and would more suitably be addressed at length elsewhere. However, the examples of racism, imperialism, and racialism in his speculative fiction writing supply a complex, queasy, and intriguing glimpse into the post-Gilded Age mindset. In works like “The Scarlet Plague,” “The Unparalleled Invasion,” “The Red One,” “The Strength of the Strong,” and “Goliath,” London employs his prejudices and his knowledge of racialism and eugenics to sculpt bitter, bleak visions of damaged futuristic or fantastic societies in which the detestable, racist main characters suffer almost preternatural torment because of their beliefs, actions, and attitudes, yet remain stubbornly uncompromising in them. Some of these works function as funny, cannily constructed satires. Others dip into full-on apocalyptic nightmare in the situations they present. None of them allow London’s doggedly racist characters to emerge redeemed. In life, Jack London may have been casually racist and imperialist without apology. But in his speculative fiction, his characters invariably pay a grim price for their beliefs.

In his 1901 essay “These Bones Shall Rise Again,” London declared that “the nineteenth century, so far as the Anglo-Saxon is concerned, was remarkable for two great developments: the mastery of matter and the expansion of the race” (“These Bones Shall Rise Again” 65). By all biographical accounts, London’s own mother began filling his head with notions of Anglo-Saxon superiority almost before he could walk, despite the fact that she owed her son’s very survival to an African-American neighbor and acquaintance. Virginia Prentiss was an escaped slave whose husband worked for London’s father, and it was thanks to her care and affection that the baby

boy she nicknamed “Jack” made it through his sickly infancy (Charmian London, in her biography of her late husband entitled *The Book of Jack London*, even implies that “Mammy Jenny” nursed the infant Jack when his mother wasn’t able to produce milk) (C. London 26). Jack London responded to Prentiss’s adoration in turn, remaining close with her and taking care of her and her family until her death; Charmian London refers to Prentiss as more of a mother figure to Jack than his own mother ever was (27). London’s uncomplicatedly healthy and loving relationship with Prentiss and her children provides an uncomfortable contrast to the reprehensible detail in the opening passages of his 1911 novel *Adventure*, when he talks about “woolly-headed, black-skinned savage[s]” with “ugly and ape-like” bodies (*Adventure* 1). Andrew J. Furer, in “‘Zone Conquerors’ and ‘White Devils’: The Contradictions of Race in the Works of Jack London” (1996), asserts that London’s racist views “could be construed as a response to social and biographical pressures” and implies that the racism and imperialism that London displayed in his writing was not only common during this time in history, but expected (Furer 159). Andrew Sinclair, in *Jack: A Biography of Jack London* (1977), depicts London as a manic depressive and blames his racist behavior on mental illness. James Haley’s biography *Wolf: The Lives of Jack London* places a great deal of the blame for London’s racism on his frequently abusive mother, but Haley also details a “cold Nietzschean individualism” in young Jack, who lived an exceptionally hardscrabble youth, yet nevertheless sustained an aggressive, antagonistic relationship with the homeless people, often immigrants from China or Africa, whom he would encounter on the street and often compete with for employment, living space, and opportunity (Haley 42).

Whatever the root cause might have been for his racist attitudes, there can be no doubt, as Jeanne Campbell Reesman states in “‘Never Travel Alone’: Naturalism, Jack London, and the

White Silence” (1997), that London was one of the most race-conscious writers of his time, a writer of “profound dualities of thought” (“Never Travel Alone” 38). All of his writing is threaded thematically with the folly that accompanies willful solitude or excessive self-reliance. London recognized that people need help in order to survive, that the self “is individually or socially constructed, and survival depends upon imagination, plasticity, and tolerance” (42). In his autobiographical novel *John Barleycorn* (1913), London called life “unthinkable” without community, symbolically inviting everyone to come sit at his table by entreating “Come . . . Your glass is empty. Fill and forget” (*John Barleycorn* 949-950). Yet the character of Granser in “The Scarlet Plague,” wandering alone in a disease-ravaged society, scurries away from any people of color he encounters, labeling them “filthy” and “abhorrent” (“The Scarlet Plague” 333). Granser would rather continue to endure his loneliness than spend any time with a person of a different race. As James G. Cooper points out in “The Summit and the Abyss: Jack London’s Moral Philosophy” (1979), Jack London “emerges as a classic case of the writer whose conscious mind says one thing while the reader, using the writer’s work as the voice of his unconscious, hears just the opposite” (Cooper n.p.). Repeatedly in his autobiographical work and personal letters, London made a point of declaring his magnanimity, tolerance, and inclusiveness, yet his fiction continued to drip with racism that was often chilling in its matter-of-fact insouciance. Dale H. Ross, in “Jack London: An American Dilemma” (1982), makes a similar statement, declaring that “the age in which London lived and wrote was the age of Darwinism applied to society . . . thus, when London is concerned for espousing conflicting and contradictory ideas and causes, his judges are, unknowingly perhaps, charging him with no greater error than being the representative of the world in which he lived” (Ross 57). London’s

racism, then, cannot be explained, cannot be justified, and cannot be contextualized in any sort of satisfactory way, despite multiple attempts and analyses.

The source of Jack London's aggressive xenophobia is easier to discern, especially if his own daughter is to be believed. Joan London regularly pointed out that her father's favorite theme, in literature and in life, was struggle—in particular, “the struggle of an individual to survive in a hostile environment or to be successful against great odds” (qtd. in Introduction 6). Jack London frequently expressed amazement at the resiliency, strength, and resourcefulness of the native people that he encountered during his youthful travels abroad and far north, and envied their efficiency, their seeming adaptability, and how easily they coexisted with nature. In *Jack London: A Life*, Alex Kershaw describes the realizations that London reached about how the “history of mankind has been a history of contests between exploiting and exploited” and those who are exploited can only thrive by eradicating “all future exploitation, oppression, class distinctions, and class struggles” (Kershaw 40). In areas where oppressed people were often able to overcome that oppression and carve out comfortable lives against all odds, London only floundered, acquiring dysentery in Mexico and fever in the Pacific islands, and losing his money, watch, and clothing in a Japanese fishing port. As a youth, London was quite often simply unsuccessful as a traveler and adventurer, and it was his self-consciousness about these difficulties, and his firsthand awareness that “dreams are made real at often terrible costs,” that may have contributed to the insecure distrust of foreign environments that tended to permeate his work, and that spurred in him an interest in the concept of “scientific racialism” preached by the eugenicists (72).

London's adherence to the tenets of Social Darwinism has been outlined in the previous chapter. One of the deeply problematic aspects of this theory is the fact that, during the Gilded

Age, it could be construed as giving a cloak of scientific legitimacy to racist thought. In 1901, the British journalist Meredith Townsend published, to some acclaim, *Asia and Europe: Studies Presenting the Conclusions Formed by the Author in a Long Life Devoted to the Subject of the Relations between Asia and Europe*, a lengthy, unfocused diatribe whose thesis was that the white man needed to assert his moral right of racial domination, and quickly, before the unfit races attempted to assert theirs. Essentially, Townsend cloaked a call for a race war in academic language and contorted it inside the shell of a sociological treatise. His resoundingly offensive, barely readable book depicts Asians and Africans as corrupt and unintelligent, markedly inferior to white, Anglo-Saxon Europeans, and leans heavily upon Social Darwinism as support for its claims. It is possible, insists Townsend, in the midst of a three-page paragraph, that white Europeans initially brought civilization to China by “imparting to a lower and darker aboriginal race some of its energy and power of accumulating knowledge,” before moving onto India and “raising the character” of those they encountered there (Townsend 20).

Townsend’s contemptible views were shared by many scientists and naturalists who emerged around the turn of the century, galvanized by the theories put forth by Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer. Lois A. Cuddy and Claire M. Roche, in *Evolution and Eugenics in American Literature and Culture: 1880-1940* (2003), articulate the inadvertent connection that developed between Darwinism and eugenics, pointing out how Darwin’s concepts of “the struggle for life, adaptation, and progress made their way into all aspects of intellectual production and influenced the development of eugenics and social sciences as part of this new evolutionary paradigm of life” (Cuddy and Roche 9). Eugenicists recognized an implicit correlation between the Spencerian notion of the “survival of the fittest” and their own beliefs in racial supremacy and separation, and they worked towards making the relationship between

those two theories more overt and more significant. Eugenicists hoped, explain Cuddy and Roche, to find in Darwin's "rhetoric of evolutionary development . . . justification for [the] white man's belief in his own superiority" (18).

Jack London was a follower of Darwinism and an avid admirer of Herbert Spencer, so he was naturally drawn into the orbit of those, like Ernst Haeckel and David Starr Jordan, who purported a relationship between Spencer's theory of Social Darwinism and eugenics. In his autobiography, *The Days of a Man: Memories of a Naturalist, Teacher and Minor Prophet of Democracy* (1922), Jordan recalls meeting and befriending London during a series of lectures on evolution and Social Darwinism and takes credit for introducing London to eugenics, going so far as to deem him his "intellectual disciple" (Jordan 460). In "A Note on Jack London and David Starr Jordan" (1942), David H. Dickason depicts London circa 1899 as impressionable and not especially well-educated, and thus susceptible to Jordan's intelligence and charisma as he delivered lectures with titles like "The Kinship of Life" and "Evolution: What It Is and What It Is Not;" Dickason ultimately anoints Jordan as "the most active influence in the building of Jack London's intellectual platform" (Dickason 409-410). Ernst Haeckel, a German naturalist whose book *The History of Creation* (1876) made the claim that "woolly-haired Negros . . . [were] incapable of a true inner culture and of a higher mental development," established a correspondence with London that lasted for years at the beginning of the 20th century; Haeckel praised London's novel *Before Adam*, and the two men communicated often about eugenics and the idea of "racialism" (Haeckel n.p.). Enthusiastically under the sway of eugenics as preached by Jordan and Haeckel, London admitted his fondness for the theory in his 1905 essay "Wanted: A New Law of Development." The essay opens with a discussion of evolution and socialism

before segueing rather jarringly into the importance of “a race [that is] purged of its weak and inefficient members” (“Wanted: A New Law of Development” 263).

“Racialism,” in this particular context, was a term that saw a great deal of use during the Gilded Age, especially when its users were attempting to validate racist language or attitudes. Most recently articulated by the Bulgarian literary critic Tzvetan Todorov, it is the acknowledgment that “one’s race is superior, but not necessarily implying hatred for the other race” (qtd. in *Racial Lives* 35). Todorov argues that Jack London was a racialist, not a racist, supporting his own argument by stating that a true racist would not have spent so much time in the company of natives during his travels among the Pacific islands. In *Jack London’s Racial Lives*, Jeanne Campbell Reesman describes how the “unchecked racialism” in London’s work “inevitably brings out artistic failure,” then painstakingly details the confused, erratic, “historically limited” perspective on racialism vis-à-vis racism in much of his writing (67). The unabashedly racist aspects of London’s storytelling can be linked, Reesman’s text suggests, to the Gilded Age’s “surging Romantic interest in uniqueness, in language, and in national and racial origins” (36). Many U.S. Anglo Saxonists believed that “the world was to be transformed not by the strength of better ideas but by the power of a superior race” (36). This was a mindset that London subscribed to, as well. “I believe that the future human world belongs to eugenics,” he once said, “and will be determined by the practice of eugenics . . . Humans breed in ways very and quite similar to animals; and if humans misbreed, the results are misbreds” (*Letters* 1226). This chilling quote came from London near the end of his life, after a hospital stay; his remark about misbred humans appeared in the same paragraph as a line comparing people to the cattle in London’s stock farm. It smacks of complacency and closed-mindedness. London, in his view, is merely stating that which is proven fact.

Thomas C. Leonard, in “Making Eugenics for Social Darwinism: Why Eugenics is Missing from the History of American Economics” (2005), stresses that, during London’s time, “reformers regarded science as a means for understanding social and economic problems, and also as a policy method . . . for setting the world to rights” (Leonard 201). Thus, the ideas of Social Darwinism and eugenics took on validity in some circles as potential means to instigate significant societal change. However, Leonard quickly and thoroughly illustrates the flawed thinking at the very heart of eugenics:

Darwin allowed that species compete with one another to some extent, though he also believed, most clearly for nonhuman animals, that competition among individuals within a species was more intensive and more important for evolution by natural selection . . . Eugenists, on the other hand, tended to regard fitness as a moral or racial attitude . . . The social control of human breeding, after all, could not succeed without a prior judgment as to who (that is, which groups) was biologically superior (Leonard 227).

In *Race in American Science Fiction*, Isiah Lavender similarly unpacks and refutes Social Darwinism as “based on an erroneous and inappropriate extension of Darwinian theory to the evolution of societies, rather than species. As such, social Darwinism has nothing to do with biology--and little to do with Darwin himself--although it has often been used in support of racist arguments” (Lavender 43). Lavender then connects these ideas to the emergent speculative fiction writing of the early 20th century, stating that “scientific racism disguised as Social Darwinism has harmed both American culture and speculative fiction because, through extrapolation, it traces human evolution to the posthuman and beyond” (42). In *The Descent of Man* (1871), Charles Darwin does explicitly state that “at some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace

throughout the world the savage races” (Darwin 201). What many eugenicists and Social Darwinists failed to grasp was that Darwin deemed this inevitable extermination *tragic*, not something that should be aspired towards--or hastened along.

Such an extermination has already occurred when London’s short story “The Scarlet Plague” begins. It is the 21st century, and the titular plague has wiped out most of civilization, save for a few groups of scavengers scattered about the United States. The story’s main character is Granser, an elderly man who, at the behest of his grandchildren, recounts the history of the plague and its aftermath in disturbing, often grotesque detail. The plague, in the form of a mysterious, fast-acting, flesh-eating bacteria, made its lethal way through all of society, starting with the upper class and moving to the lower, ultimately ensuring that all people are indeed equal--everyone, as Granser puts it, is a “brute” or a “human beast of prey” (“The Scarlet Plague” 329). Granser forlornly recalls his days as an English professor named James Smith, while his increasingly impatient grandsons scoff at his story and shout him down at every turn. “How do you know anything you can’t see?” grumbles one. “Fighting things that ain’t with things that ain’t! They must have been all fools in them days. That’s why they croaked” (332). The story presents a post-apocalyptic society in which an educated man, a former teacher, is unable to communicate effectively with a trio of children without being mocked and bursting into frustrated tears. It is a pitiable scenario--until we begin to learn precisely what type of man Granser was in his past life as an academic. Increasingly flustered and distracted by his grandsons, he begins to jabber excitedly about his hope for the future, when there will be a “new Aryan drift around the world” (359).

Granser’s frighteningly casual racism, and his matter-of-fact view of the Anglo-Saxon as the superior culture, does supply a bit of a shock when it is first revealed, but then London

pushes it to almost parodic extremes. Granser speaks at great length of his loneliness during the first days of the plague, and of his desperate desire for some form of human contact, but when he finally does cross paths with a fellow survivor (who is dark-skinned), he promptly unleashes a stream of hateful invective, calling the “narrow-minded, dark, heavy-jawed, slant-browed” man both “a blot on the face of nature” and “the most abhorrent man I have ever known” (334). It is around this point that the modern reader begins to lose sympathy for Granser.

As “The Scarlet Plague” nears its conclusion, Granser resignedly comes to grips with the realization that the old days he longs for will never return, and that he will spend the rest of his days as an obsolete laughingstock. “Strange it is to hear the vestiges and remnants of the complicated Aryan speech falling from the lips of a filthy little skin-clad savage,” he muses as he skulks off into the sunset. “All the world is topsy-turvy” (364). In *Breeding and Eugenics in the American Literary Imagination: Heredity Rules in the Twentieth Century* (2015), Ewa Barbara Luczak speculates that “The Scarlet Plague” “addresses the eugenic fear of the fall of the Aryan race and a concomitant belief in the resilience and permanent character of that same race” (Luczak 87). London’s story definitely does depict a world that has crumbled into what might be called a eugenicist’s nightmare, but Granser is so over-the-top, single-minded, and one-dimensional in his characterization that one cannot help but think London intended him as a caricature. In fact, Granser, in his pre-plague incarnation as James Smith, a white, Anglo-Saxon professor and eugenicist from northern California, might even be said to bear more than a passing resemblance to David Starr Jordan. It was Jordan, in *The Blood of a Nation* (1902), who claimed that “the blood of the nation flows in the veins of those who survive . . . those who die without descendants can not color in the stream of heredity” (*The Blood of a Nation* 8). Such a declaration could easily have come from the mouth of Granser, however.

In his 1910 manifesto *The Call of the Nation*, Jordan pondered “the problem of eugenics, the problem of building up our nation with folks of sound heredity,” concluding that “the strength of the Republic can be maintained only by strong men, the sons of strong men” (*The Call of the Nation* 48). London’s short story “The Strength of the Strong,” which saw its first publication a year later, examines a collection of these purportedly strong men, in the form of a prehistoric society of cavemen and Neanderthals, and describes their failure to achieve any sort of success in formulating and maintaining a socialist community. Structured in a fashion similar to “The Scarlet Plague”—a tribal elder telling a cautionary tale to a group of youngsters—the story details the constant, almost slapstick failures of the “Meat-Eaters”—the lower class of cave-dweller, relegated to all the menial work—to achieve equality with the “Fish-Eaters,” who do nothing other than sit idly by and enjoy the spoils with which they are provided (“The Strength of the Strong” 531). The Meat-Eaters attempt on several occasions to revolt, but cannot succeed; they are driven back first through force, second through fear of “the voice of God,” and third through money, in the form of pearls. “It was very strange,” recounts Long Beard, the main character. “Whenever a man arose and wanted to go forward, all those that stood still said he went backward and should be killed . . . We were all fools, except those that were fat and did no work” (“The Strength of the Strong” 533). In the primitive world that London has created in this story, the eugenic and Social Darwinist ideal of a race in which the strongest, most superior humans survive and thrive turns out to be impossible because these characters lack the crucial trait of self-awareness: they are unable to grasp their own value.

In “Wanted: A New Law of Development,” London reflected upon the demise of the “old selective law,” due to the fact that the common man now “does the work of the world, and he is beginning to know it. The world cannot get along without him . . . never was he so strong as he

is today, and never so menacing” (“Wanted: A New Law of Development” 224). In “The Strength of the Strong,” The Meat-Eaters possess no such confidence, so Long Beard’s last thoughts in the story echo those of Granser in the final moments of “The Scarlet Plague”: weary, beaten down and near death, yet unwavering and basically unchanged in his beliefs, still holding onto some deluded semblance of hope that his dreams of a world in which “all the fools will be dead and then all live men will go forward” may still yet come to fruition (“The Strength of the Strong” 536). The lasting impression given by many of the characters in London’s speculative fiction, particularly those who inhabit barren, primitive, or dystopian wastelands, is pitiable; they remain blissfully ignorant of the futility of their existence, and of achieving the peace that they so crave.

“Where is the strength of the strong?” Long Beard entreats, wondering why the underclass, more physically powerful than the ruling class, never even attempted to rise up against their oppressors (“The Strength of the Strong” 530). H.G. Wells, arguably London’s most significant peer in the turn-of-the-century speculative fiction genre, might have answered this question by stating that the ruling class is “mechanically released from the penalty of the Fall”—that the oppressor, in other words, is immune to revolt thanks to his eugenic superiority (Wells 43). Wells’s 1901 work of nonfiction social commentary *Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress Upon Human Life and Thought* addresses the topic of eugenics head-on, and this bestselling book goes disturbingly berserk in its final chapter (titled “Faith, Morals and Public Policy”). “To the multiplying rejected of the white and yellow civilizations there will have been added a vast proportion of the black and brown races,” Wells rants breathlessly, “and collectively those masses will propound the general question, ‘What will you do with us, we hundreds of millions, who cannot keep pace with you?’” (Wells 159). A

couple of pages later, Wells all but outright encourages the extermination of people who might be eugenically inferior. “The idea that only those who are fit to live freely in an orderly world-state should be permitted to live, is entirely against the use of deterrent punishments at all.” he says. “To kill under the seemingly conditions science will afford is a far less offensive thing . . . People who cannot live happily and freely in the world without spoiling the lives of others are better out of it” (Wells 162). Wells spent the last years of his life attempting spin control for his statements in this book, issuing apologies and writing pieces that encouraged racial harmony and decried prejudice of any sort. He was hardly the only individual to hold such extreme views, though. In “H.G. Wells: Darwin’s Disciple and Eugenicist Extraordinaire” (2004), Jerry Bergman points out that many Darwinians viewed eugenics as nothing less than “a key to human salvation . . . a popular and optimistic gloss on Darwin’s theory of evolution had simply replaced the Divine Purpose by the process of natural selection” (Bergman 116). Jack London was canny enough not to preach his eugenic beliefs in such an explicit manner, at least in print; he typically did so through the veil of speculative fiction, placing his words in the mouth of a narrator or main character who then ended the story in anguish, cursing his own ineffectiveness and lamenting a hoped-for world that never arrived. In “The Red One,” for instance, the tribal chief matter-of-factly informs Bassett that “a sick man who cannot get well is foolish to live on . . . it is better for the living that he should go,” adding, “you have been much in the way as of late” (“The Red One” 274). Thus, Bassett’s own eugenicist beliefs end up being turned against him and used as justification for his own execution—and he finds himself ironically hard-pressed to argue with the chief’s logic.

The worlds London built tended towards the dystopian or post-apocalyptic, providing a stark landscape against which he could examine these emerging ideas and experiment with them;

in *Jack London's Racial Lives*, Jeanne Campbell Reesman references Richard Gid Powers's argument that London's speculative fiction tales addressed racial pride and insecurity, evoking prehistorical societies or establishing futuristic ones in which the so-called "hero of evolution, the Anglo-Saxon survivor" strove to find evidence of his own superiority, and was ultimately only able to do so by devising "a clean, beautiful, primitive world in which, he convinced himself, the fit, be they man or beast, could and would survive" (qtd. in *Racial Lives* 33). As illustrated, stories like "The Strength of the Strong" and "The Scarlet Plague" smack of uncertainty, of the notion that perhaps this ideal world being promoted so strongly is nothing other than a further work of elaborately constructed fiction.

London approached the idea of imperialism from a similar angle during this time. His racist and xenophobic beliefs led naturally into a staunchly imperialist world view, which he adopted, according to Robert Peluso in "Gazing at Royalty: Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* and the Emergence of American Imperialism" (1996), to provide what he viewed as "an antidote to anxieties about the decline of American Anglo-Saxonism" (Peluso 68). Just as London's logic for constructing speculative fiction in which other races were vilified or regarded as implicitly inferior was a reflection of his own misguided, Social Darwinist, eugenicist views, his matter-of-fact presentation of American superiority reflected his flawed sense of patriotism, and his desire to advance "a personal and national fantasy of American cultural supremacy" (74). "The Unparalleled Invasion" is perhaps the single most flagrant example of London's toxic imperialism. A short story that depicts an alternate world in which China is the preeminent global superpower and rules the world through terror and intimidation, the tale presents the Chinese not only as irredeemable villains, but as *aliens*, perversely mesmerizing in their otherness: yellow-skinned, slant-eyed, ignorant, filthy, and so brainless that "the Western mind

penetrated the Chinese mind but a short distance when it found itself in a fathomless maze” (“The Unparalleled Invasion” 536). The story is virtually wall-to-wall with offensive, racist vitriol; China’s populace is referred to, in what is meant to be a grotesque metaphor, as a “flood of yellow life,” and once the West uses a plague to wipe the Chinese out, the ensuing appropriation of Chinese land by whites is lauded as a happy time in which “splendid mechanical, intellectual, and art output” emerged (541).

“The Unparalleled Invasion” is as dispiritingly racist and xenophobic as anything London has ever written, yet there are those who argue, convincingly, that it is an ironic commentary on Asian oppression by the West. In “Jack London’s ‘The Unparalleled Invasion’: Germ Warfare, Eugenics, and Cultural Hygiene” (2002), John N. Swift calls it a “strange little fantasy” and recounts London’s own bemusement with the story before describing it as a carefully constructed record of a specific type of “anxiety in the face of a polyethnic future . . . that gives expression to an uneasy premonition of the precariousness of white racial supremacy” (Swift 60). Swift makes note of the way London leans heavily on science as a means to combat the antagonistic Chinese, lingering over the details behind the construction of a weaponized chemical agent to spread the disease that quells the conflict, and finally deems London’s tale less an alarmingly racist parable than a “clear and vigorous” mirror of “the great racist/scientific mythologies of his culture” (68). As he did with “The Red One,” London constructs “The Unparalleled Invasion” as a racist parable that, as its conclusion nears, acquires ironic undertones. The Chinese are presented as almost subhuman, and worthy of mockery, but their dominance is ultimately so overpowering that the Americans can only overcome them through what may be the most primitive means imaginable: utter, apocalyptic destruction.

By contrast, London's literary idol, Rudyard Kipling, employed no such irony in a poem like "The White Man's Burden" (1899), his condescending call for colonization that dubs those from undeveloped nations "half-devil and half-child" (n.p.). Kipling's poem remains widely regarded today as shallow, racist imperialism. Edward W. Said addresses this matter in his introduction to a 1989 edition of Kipling's *Kim*. Said denounces Kipling's racist writing but also makes the point that Kipling "was . . . supported by the authorized monuments of nineteenth-century European culture, for whom the inferiority of non-white races, the necessity for them to be ruled by a superior civilization . . . were more or less undebatable, unquestioned axioms of modern life" (Said 30). Context, in other words, needs to be kept in mind when considering these pieces and their intentions.

David A. Moreland, in his essay "The Quest that Failed: Jack London's Last Tales of the South Seas" (1984), mentions London's interest in the work of Carl Jung, whose psychological studies illuminated the importance, in many cultures, of expressing dreams in the form of myths (Moreland 55). London's own Jungian expressions of eugenic thought through fanciful, futuristic scenarios often enabled him to bring in language, ideas, and attitudes that he did not employ anywhere else in his writing. Some of these ideas were inflammatory and misguided, but they nonetheless remain sociologically important as examples of what speculative fiction writers circa 1900 believed deserved emphasis in their work. Isiah Lavender underlines the value of this sort of writing by stating that "[speculative fiction] functions as an unconscious barometer of public attitudes . . . particularly beneficial in understanding the assumptions of our society before, now, and later . . . because SF's vision concerns the cultural and philosophical consequences of technological advancement and scientific progress" (Lavender 44). From amid the toxicity of stories like "The Unparalleled Invasion," "The Scarlet Plague," and other race-

focused speculative fiction composed by London emerges a portrait of a society struggling with adaptation and reacting to the barrage of significant changes to day-to-day existence that accompanied the segue of the Gilded Age into the Progressive Era with concern, confusion, excitement, and trepidation.

Expectedly, Charmian London tries her best to sidestep her late husband's racial views and prejudices in *The Book of Jack London* (1921), focusing instead on the tragedies of Jack's life and the great physical pain that he endured for much of it. "The Red One" first saw publication in 1918, two years after Jack London's death from uremic poisoning; Charmian presents the story as something that Jack composed in a frenzy, the specter of his mortality hanging over every page. At first read, "The Red One" is positively rancorous, filled with excessive racism and one ugly image after another. The account of Bassett, a sanctimonious scientist who journeys deep into the jungles of Guadalcanal on a butterfly-catching expedition, only to blunder across a mysterious tribe of indigenous natives, the story has barely begun before Bassett is describing his island guide's "queer little monkeyish face eloquent with fear" and chuckling with glee at the memory of gorily stomping one of the natives to death ("The Red One" 263). Bassett eventually becomes obsessed with discovering the source of a bizarre pealing sound that he equates with "the trump of an archangel," and he ingratiates himself with the cannibalistic tribe in an attempt to learn the truth about what they call "the Red One" (264). Bassett's actions and behavior remain detestably racist and hateful—at one point, he encounters a young girl hanging from a tree by one arm, her legs crudely broken, and makes the smug, self-congratulatory decision to shoot her as a mercy killing. However, Charmian London's equating of the story with her dying husband's agonized attempts to uncover some truth about death and

what waits beyond casts a new light on this dour tale, and helps it to serve as an encapsulation of what London attempted to address in much of his race-based speculative fiction.

Fueled by desperation and entitlement, Bassett allows one of the tribal women—who is attracted by the “pristine whiteness” of his skin—to become his de facto mate, despite the fact that he describes at length how “unthinkably disgusting” she is and how violently she repulses him, with her “eyes like denizens of monkey-cages” (264). Bassett also situates himself as an advisor of sorts to the tribal elder, although the only meaningful conversations the two of them have tend to be calm, unadorned discussions about how Bassett’s head will taste when the natives eat it. Mortally ill with fever, Bassett volunteers himself to be cannibalized, provided the tribe first takes him to “the Red One”—the odd, alien sphere that the jungle natives worship. The Red One, of course, is never explained, and provides the dying Bassett with no answers or satisfaction, save for the “sense of impending marvel at the rending of walls before the imaginable” (265). “It was as if God’s World had fallen into the muck mire of the abyss underlying the bottom of hell;” Bassett ponders, “as if Jehovah’s Commandments had been presented on carved stone to the monkeys of the monkey cage at the zoo; as if the Sermon on the Mount had been preached in a roaring bedlam of lunatics” (268). Bassett remains self-centered and entitled almost to the very end, pondering how unfortunate it is that an object as intriguing and wonderful as the Red One is wasted among so many jungle savages

In “Jack London’s Quest: ‘The Red One’” (1980), James Kirsch points out that many scientists in the late nineteenth century found themselves urgently resorting to pseudosciences like phrenology to support their claims of black inferiority in the years after Darwin’s work came to the fore (Kirsch 139). He identifies Bassett as one of these scientists, and attributes the character’s non-stop onslaught of vile descriptive detail and comparisons to jungle animals to his

desire to distance himself, as thoroughly and dispassionately as he can, from those people upon whose land he has interloped (139). Bassett haughtily describes himself as “a scientist first, a humanist afterwards,” perfectly willing to see his mate, and many of her fellow tribesmen, sacrificed if that means he can learn “the message of the world from other worlds” (“The Red One” 266). Only during his final moments does he come to grips with the futility of such an undertaking, and the fact that it has made him morally subordinate to the tribal people whom he consistently held in such low esteem—people who were never less than utterly forthright and explicit in their motives, lifestyles, and intentions. “Had they won Brotherhood?” Bassett muses during his last moments. “Or had they learned that the law of love imposed the penalty of weakness and decay? Was strife, life? Was the rule of the universe the pitiless rule of natural selection?” (276). Seconds before his demise, it would seem, Bassett recognizes the error of his ways and the flaws of his thinking. Charmian London, in *The Book of Jack London*, argued that her husband, who once referred to himself as a white man first, and then a socialist, in a manner that echoes Bassett’s statement, experienced a similar realization as his own time was drawing to a close.

In the closing chapters of her memoir, Charmian London sketches an image of her husband in Hawaii during his last months, “warped with sickness,” searching for some sort of final satisfaction in his surroundings, that is eerily equivalent to that of Bassett. “With all this in his grasp, the instinct to search still drove him on,” she relates. “He was doomed to remain unsatisfied, and unsatisfied he remained.” (C. London 321). Charmian refers to “The Red One,” halfheartedly attempts to justify its racist language, and then wonders “if it can be possible, in the ponderings of the dying scientist, Bassett, that Jack London revealed more of himself than he would have been willing to admit—or else, who knows? more of himself than he himself

realized” (334). The impression left by this passage is that, in one of his final pieces of writing, Jack London succeeded in merging himself with his fiction more profoundly than he had before and acknowledging, more forcefully than he had in any of his previous works of fiction or non-fiction, his flawed, fictitious, racist main character as a kindred spirit, similarly tragic, similarly unsatisfied, and similarly misguided. It seems only fitting that London’s final work of speculative fiction dealt with such duality and concluded with an ultimately failed struggle between man and his damaged inner nature.

This duality, and this sense of oppressive socialism, also reared its head in other speculative works by London. He once declared that “socialism is not an ideal system devised for the happiness of all men,” but “is devised so as to give more strength to [Northern European] races so that they may survive and inherit the earth to the extinction of the lesser, weaker races” (qtd. in Gossett 206). His dystopian short story “A Curious Fragment” dramatizes this specific kind of oppressive socialism, dubbing it “the dark reign of the overman” and presenting a downtrodden society in which storytelling is outlawed and teaching anything at all to the “herd animals” that comprise the working class is the most heinous of crimes, since it would give them “the strength to break their bonds” and sever the master-slave divide (“A Curious Fragment” 80). From a plot perspective, “A Curious Fragment” is essentially a futuristic recasting of “The Strength of the Strong,” as the working class strives again and again to resist marginalization and achieve equality, and as with “The Strength of the Strong,” race is never explicitly mentioned. However, the fact that the antagonists control a cotton factory and believe that “the clay of their bodies is different stuff from the clay in . . . the bodies of all slaves” renders any direct references to race unnecessary (77). The story is a fiery condemnation of racial and class-based injustice, firmly on the side of the slaves; it concludes with a rousing call to arms, the nameless narrator

entreating the slave class to “learn about your masters, and learn to become as strong even as they,” and promising that “there is a good time coming, when all will be well in the world and there will be neither masters nor slaves” (81). London’s treatment of race here, though implicit, contrasts sharply with something like “The Unparalleled Invasion,” with its blunt insensitivity and adherence to racial stereotypes in depicting Chinese citizens as one jabbering, excitable mass of bloodthirsty humanity consisting of unclean “wretches” with no aspirations other than to be “rejuvenescent, fruitful, and militant” (“The Unparalleled Invasion” 539). In “A Curious Fragment’s” context of social injustice and the need to circumvent the class divide, London identifies with the racially oppressed, and rails against racist, capitalist, and imperialist values. In *Jack London’s Racial Lives: A Critical Biography*, Jeanne Campbell Reesman attributes this identification to London’s fear of insignificance, adding that “racial identity was and is a key factor in class anxiety for economically oppressed and socially irrelevant white people like him” (Introduction 6). In London’s view, racial inequity was superseded by social inequity. Joan London explained her father’s contradictory, clashing viewpoints, stating that Jack believed strongly in working-class solidarity and “visualizing the revolutionary struggle, he saw workers of all races as comrades and brothers.” She adds, however, that “in a specific situation when for instance, the hated ‘little brown man’ was involved, the abstraction vanished and the prejudice returned” (qtd. in “The Quest That Failed” 54). London had no difficulty identifying with the class struggles of those of African or Asian descent, but any sympathy he held towards their status as oppressed members of the proletariat were superseded by his prejudice against them as people.

Like Bassett in “The Red One,” however, London displayed an awareness of the damages that modern life tended to wreak on those who viewed themselves as civilized, leaving them

much more morally askew than people like the Inuits or the Hawaiian islanders. As Isiah Lavender insisted, “a moment of otherhood happens because of the transference of real social messages onto SF as people explore relationships of race, racism, and power” (Lavender 44). In *The People of the Abyss*, London’s non-fiction account of working class London circa 1900, he grumbled that “civilisation has increased man’s producing power an hundred-fold, and through mismanagement the men of Civilisation live worse than the beasts” (*The People of the Abyss* 66). The title character in London’s “Goliah” exists to remedy that discord.

An enigmatic figure of indeterminate race who resides on a vaguely defined Pacific island, Goliah regards modern man as a “semi-barbarian” and a “slave to his collective stupidity,” and declares his intention to mold the world into a “society so that food and shelter be made automatic, labor be reduced to a three-hour day, and joy and laughter be made universal” (“Goliah” 85). The means by which Goliah manages to orchestrate all of this might seem outlandish even in modern pulp fiction or comic books: he essentially wipes out the world’s military and then demands the closing of all businesses, thereby *forcing* class and racial harmony on everyone. Goliah angrily dismisses materialism as just another antiquated conceit to be shrugged off during man’s constant evolution and development, on par with such archaic notions as the divinity of royalty. “With food and shelter automatic,” Goliah proclaims, the human race will be able to achieve “the spiritual, aesthetic, and intellectual incentives that will tend to make beautiful and noble mind, body, and spirit” (86). Racial harmony remains an implicit part of this promised beauty, although the ethnically ambiguous Goliah does employ a metaphor for this envisioned society—“All will be joy-smiths and their task shall be to beat out laughter from the ringing anvil of life”—that suggests an awareness of menial slave labor and the need for its abolishment (85). Goliah is depicted as an altruistic terrorist, and although London’s strange

stylistic choices mar the story's overall impact (he applies, for instance, an incomprehensible coda, referencing Asgard, the year 2254, and some sort of futuristic high school writing contest), the fact that Goliath has to use threats, destruction, and murder to impose his ideas of paradise and equality onto the human race is finally a cynical, even melancholic notion. "Goliath" depicts a modern society so consumed by complacency, prejudice, and class divide that it would take something apocalyptic to enforce change—even positive change. In the end, Goliath achieves what he wants, but London is quick to remind his readers of his piece's origins in extreme fantasy. It is only in this fantasy world, he suggests, that mankind can achieve the better tomorrow it seems to hope for so desperately.

Jack London's racism, and the attitudes, theories, and treatment of race in his literature, will always serve as an unavoidable, upsetting, damaging facet of his legacy. Jeanne Campbell Reesman alludes to his capabilities of "uttering abhorrent crudities in support of white superiority, while a majority of his short stories are rich in imaginative insight into the lives of racial Others" (Introduction 2). In *The Buddha in the Machine: Art, Technology, and the Meeting of East and West* (2014), R. John Williams summarizes the issue of racism in London's work in this manner:

One cannot legitimately claim, as some apologetic London scholars have attempted to, that London gradually 'outgrew' his racism, or that his racism was less evident in his fiction than in his nonfiction, or even that London modified his racial views according to what he thought his various audiences wanted to hear. Indeed, there are too many examples of blatant racism in London's writing running across all of these possibilities. And yet, one cannot simply argue that London was only ever racist, or that he never

modified his racial ideas, or that he subscribed uncomplicatedly and consistently to white supremacy and Anglo-American hegemony (48).

Any meaningful conversation about Jack London, regrettably, needs to acknowledge the fact that he was a racist writer, and that a notable portion of his output, because of this fact, is contemptible. Yet, as Isiah Lavender puts it in *Race in American Science Fiction*, speculative fiction writing “reflects current social problems set against a fictive history beyond our experience of historical reality” (Lavender 41). London’s race-based speculative fiction, even at its most hurtful, is representative of the time, place, and mindset from which it grew. As such, much can be learned from the way race, race warfare, and racism are presented in London’s speculative fiction. Much can also be learned from the way London’s characters were damaged by their racist beliefs—in every instance, those who harbored vile thoughts against other races, or who viewed Anglo-Saxon Americans as inherently, obviously superior, were punished for these thoughts and views. Sometimes, in the case of Granser in “The Scarlet Plague” and Long Beard in “The Strength of the Strong,” that punishment is presented in the form of embarrassment, banishment, and obsolescence. Long Beard ends his reminiscence murmuring to himself about some vague, far-off time when “we will be so strong that all the wild animals will flee before us and perish” (“The Strength of the Strong” 530). Similarly, Granser’s final moments in “The Scarlet Plague” are spent wandering off in a self-pitying stupor, his head bowed, following “in the wake of the goats” and forlornly musing that, “[j]ust as the old civilization passed, so will the new. It may take fifty thousand years to build, but it will pass. All things pass” (“The Scarlet Plague” 333). In other cases, as with the societies and communities portrayed in “The Unparalleled Invasion” and “A Curious Fragment,” that punishment is presented as war or annihilation; in the former, the whole of China is decimated

via a manufactured plague, while in the latter, even the ostensibly hopeful narrator struggles to come up with a positive note on which to conclude his tale. In still other cases, as with Bassett in “The Red One,” that punishment is death at its most ignominious. Jack London himself died, painfully and messily, at the young age of forty, his body wracked with any number of ailments and afflictions. If, as Charmian London would have us believe, London felt a kinship with his character of Bassett, then were his dying thoughts similar to those of the racist, hateful lepidopterist who was one of his last fictional creations? Was London, in the end, able to transcend his flawed earthly form and achieve “inconceivable heights of purity and power” (“The Red One” 276)?

CHAPTER 4

“IT WAS NOT A HAPPY ABIDING-PLACE”: THE ECOCRITICAL WORLDS OF JACK LONDON’S SPECULATIVE FICTION

Jack London was one of the most well-known and highest-paid American writers of his lifetime, and was one of the few writers in the early twentieth century who could make a comfortable living through his fiction and nonfiction. Yet he still struggled to earn respect in the literary and critical communities, and he still took issue with every negative review his work received. Charmian London, in *The Book of Jack London* (1921), dedicated her most florid and heartfelt prose to a defense of her late husband’s worth as a writer. “Jack was eminently sincere in all he did,” she wrote, “whether pursuing a hard-headed course in order to discharge his patriarchal duties, or flaming his unrenumerative soul-stuff upon the incombustible wall of public opinion” (C. London 382). During the peak of Jack London’s popularity, he still generally found himself being dismissed by the cognoscenti as a writer of facile tales about dogs and one-dimensional adventurers—kid’s stuff. Even today, as Michael Dirda points out in “Jack London: Beyond *The Call of the Wild*” (2013), London is “still regularly dismissed as little more than an occasionally inspired hack” (Dirda n.p.). The vast array of biographies of Jack London, from Alex Kershaw’s *Jack London: A Life* to James L. Haley’s *Wolf: The Lives of Jack London*, linger over his exploits in the Yukon and the Polynesian islands and devote considerable length to pondering the circumstances leading to his death; critical summations of his work are rarely offered. Charmian London seemed apologetic for the subject matter of much of her husband’s output, even as she argued for its consideration as great literature. London “must weave his best into a dog-story or other fiction medium,” she explained. “Straight, unvarnished Truth about the human, no matter how gloriously portrayed, did not command an approval that paid for the beds

and bread and coats he must supply his charges” (C. London 382). Charmian London argued that her husband wrote commercial fare because it sold well, but she also made the point that inside these ostensibly straightforward, escapist tales of red-blooded explorers and their animals resided great truth, profundity, and righteousness. All the reader needed to do, she pleaded, was to dig a little, like all those pioneers chipping at rocks in the frozen north, hoping for gold to emerge.

When it comes to his treatment in the modern college classroom, Jack London is still principally regarded as an adventure writer, albeit one whose firebrand socialist beliefs sometimes made their way to the forefront of his work. Kenneth K. Brandt and Jeanne Campbell Reesman’s *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Jack London* (2015) focuses overwhelmingly on two primary texts: *The Sea-Wolf* and *The Call of the Wild*. Other works like “To Build a Fire” and *Martin Eden* are mentioned in the contexts of gender, ethnicity, and naturalism. The only work of speculative fiction that receives space in this book is *The Iron Heel*, with the main emphasis given to that story’s treatment of socialism and presentation of the working class. The bulk of London’s speculative fiction remains little-explored in the modern educational environment outside of a specific, scholarly context. As evidenced by the previous chapters, his work in this genre encompasses the scientific world, the spiritual world, and the world of race relations. It also encompasses the natural, ecological world. London’s speculative fiction often tends to venture into uncharted ecological terrain, making symbolic and metaphorical points and implications about man’s treatment of the environment that were rare in this particular genre, and displaying a sometimes ironic ecological conscience in his dark, dystopian tales. As his naturalistic adventure tales and non-fiction can attest, London wrote with a sense of environmental, ecological awareness throughout his life. But, as Barbara Lindquist points out in

“Jack London, Aesthetic Theory, and Nineteenth-Century Science” (1997), typical ecocritical analyses of London’s writing “incorporate biographical information about London, merging an exposition of his personal conflicts with an analysis of inconsistencies in his characters or the structure of his texts,” but tend to go no further (99). The pieces that have been compiled in Brandt and Reesman’s book support this statement. London dealt, in his SF, with the notion of anthropocentrism, and preached in favor of a harmonious inter-relationship between man and nature that was not dissimilar to the modern ecocritical concept of deep ecology. Attempts by man to conquer or subjugate the natural world, in tales as varied as “A Relic of the Pliocene,” “A Thousand Deaths,” and “The Red One,” led invariably to man’s humiliation at best, and desecration at worst. As Murray Bookchin points out in his essay “Social Ecology versus Deep Ecology: A Challenge for the Ecology Movement” (1987), the most potent ecological writers are those that challenge “the gross inequities in society that underpin the gross disequilibrium between society and nature” (“Social Ecology” 9). London’s literary approach to the ecological world could perhaps best be summed up by a passage from *White Fang* in which he lauds the “gods of the living flesh, solid to the touch, occupying earth-space.” “No effort of faith is necessary to believe in such a god,” London emphasizes. “No effort of will can possibly induce disbelief in such a god” (*White Fang* 131). This complex, reverential ecocritical perspective that is displayed in London’s work is why it deserves a deep, lasting legacy, and why his speculative fiction deserves a place in the college classroom.

Typically, when Jack London is taught in a college literature course, his oeuvre can be placed comfortably amid the Realists and Naturalists, alongside writers like Stephen Crane and Upton Sinclair who labored to achieve a heretofore unexperienced level of urgency in their work. London’s vivid accounts of a grim, hardscrabble life at sea or in the northern frontier have the

same ring of truth as stories like “The Open Boat” or *A Captain of Industry*. It was in his speculative fiction, however, that London nudged his writing from the journalistic to the hypothetical, creating fiction that addressed the scientific, spiritual, and cultural mindsets of the day in a fantastic fashion, but with his mastery of literary realism firmly in place. London once dismissed the fiction of Nathaniel Hawthorne by stating that he “cannot understand things that are not, but which might be, or ought to be” (*Letters* 478). To avoid falling prey to this same lack of understanding, London ensured that his speculative fiction maintained a grasp of the natural world and the unnatural world. Because of his conscientious approach to fantasy and speculative writing, and because of his acute awareness of the environments in which his stories develop, London’s speculative fiction can be evaluated through an ecocritical framework, often in an illuminating manner.

In *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005), Lawrence Buell offers a clear and succinct definition of ecocriticism. He dubs it “a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmental praxis” (Buell 430). Ecocriticism first began taking shape as a valid form of literary criticism nearly thirty years before Buell defined it in this way; William Rueckert coined the term in 1978 in his *Iowa Review* essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism,” calling ecocriticism “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (Rueckert 107). An effective ecological reading of a text, as he defined it, must address the ways in which that text treats the laws of nature, with emphasis on how man perceives the natural world and on the accuracy of the environment’s representation in the text. With its unflinching, often stark depiction of nature’s power and indifference towards the affairs of men, Jack London’s work has always easily lent itself towards an ecocritical interpretation. Works like *The Call of the Wild*,

The Cruise of the Snark, and *Burning Daylight* portray man and nature in states of strain and disharmony; characters like the narrator in “To Build a Fire” and Black Leclere in “Diable-A Dog” pay the price for their stubborn anthropocentrism and their refusal to acknowledge and show deference to the natural world around them. London’s speculative fiction is similarly populated with individuals who disregard or attempt to sway the laws of nature at their own peril. “Man’s tragic flaw,” insists William Rueckert, is “his anthropocentric (as opposed to biocentric) vision, and his compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate, and exploit every natural thing” (Rueckert 113). In works like “The Red One,” “The Strength of the Strong,” “When the World Was Young,” and “A Relic of the Pliocene,” London traps his characters in unforgiving settings and situations like flies in amber, and then, with a calculated, measured dispassion, records what transpires. In this way, he is able to create speculative fiction that can not only be viewed through an ecocritical lens, but can serve as an ecocritical *link*, drawing the Dark Romantic and modernist perspectives closer together. London’s speculative tales are carefully built around characters who share variations of the same damaging flaw: the belief that their own ability to thrive is the most important facet of their existence.

In his introduction to London’s *The Sea-Wolf and Other Stories* collection, first compiled in 2013, Earle Labor makes mention of the author’s “ecological conscience” and his prevailing message that “we despoil Nature’s bountiful gifts at the risk of our own welfare and lives” (Labor vii). Similarly, in *Evolution and “the Sex Problem”*: *American Narratives During the Eclipse of Darwinism*, Bert Bender calls attention to London’s revolutionary anticipation of “the kind of ecological thought that emerged late in the twentieth century in related fields of behavioral ecology, sociobiology, and evolutionary psychology” (80). Both critics characterize London as a practitioner of deep ecology, a holistic, utilitarian form of ecocriticism that stands

diametrically opposed to anthropocentrism, viewing the environment as a living thing and the natural world as a tenuous balance of co-existing organisms. In *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (2001), Bill Devall and George Sessions define the term as “a way of developing a new balance and harmony between individuals, communities and all of Nature . . . it can potentially satisfy our deepest yearnings; faith and trust in our most basic intuitions, and courage to take action” (Devall 7). Although the term “deep ecology” did not originate until 1973, when the philosopher Arne Naess introduced it in his essay “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary,” it is a mode of thought that can be traced back to Charles Darwin. As Christian Diehm points out in “Darwin and Deep Ecology” (2014), Darwin viewed human beings as a part of nature and allowed for a continuity between humans and other living things (Diehm 73). Thus, the survival of any member of this interlinked chain was dependent upon the well-being of the whole. If, as previously stated, Darwin’s published theories inspired the scientific and stylistic choices London made in much of his speculative fiction, then Darwin’s *attitudes* infused and enriched London’s treatment of the aftermath of those choices, and spurred him towards this deep ecological way of thinking.

^ In “Darwin and Ecology in Novels by Jack London and Barbara Kingsolver” (2011), Bender names Darwin’s work in evolutionary biology as one of the driving forces behind ecocriticism as a school of thought, and he credits Jack London’s speculative fiction for perpetuating the notion of Darwin as the supreme ecologist who first explained how life is “bound together by a web of complex relations” (“Darwin and Ecology” 131). Bender commends London’s refusal, in his speculative fiction, to “project a future of more highly evolved or altruistic human beings . . . Rather, [London] realized that humanity was threatened by the world’s exploding population, growing labor unrest, more widespread wars, the frontier

mentality that had decimated North American forests and a variety of native species, industrial degradation of the environment, and so forth” (110). London had no interest in purveying hopeful utopian fantasies, the likes of which were popular in genre fare during the early 1900’s; his writing addressed modern environmental crises and offered solemn imprecations about the potential consequences of man’s mistreatment of nature. Rare is the work of speculative fiction by Jack London that ends happily; rarer still is the work that does not climax with some degree of bloodshed or trauma. However, London balked at the notion that man’s downfall in these tales was inevitable; in the majority of his ecologically-minded speculative fiction, the bleak conclusions result from human error or frailty. His typical protagonist was a barely literate, barely articulate, uncomprehending loner like Granser in “The Scarlet Plague” whose predominant emotion is anguish over the lost, civilized world that he could not save or sustain. Like Charles Darwin, Jack London was not anti-humanist, but he did contemplate “the human’s capacity to destroy the web of life that must sustain us” (Bender 109). It was this capacity that fascinated him, and that drove much of his speculative work. Ecocriticism, as a critical lens, can further examine that fascination, and can serve as the link that connects Darwin, Literary Realism, and Jack London. Works as diverse as Darwin’s *The Descent of Man*, Stephen Crane’s “The Open Boat,” and London’s own “The Strength of the Strong” can be used to exemplify this critical theory and to convey its richness and complexity.

In *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology, and the Environment* (2003), Glen Love speaks at length of the necessity that ecocritical literature describes the interaction and scientific relationship between all living things, human and otherwise. In his definition of ecocriticism, Love cites the thesis of Rachel Carson’s 1962 book *Silent Spring*—that “science and literature (‘whether biography or history or fiction’) are inseparably aligned in their aims ‘to discover and

illuminate truth” (Love 61). The means by which these truths are discovered and illuminated, of course, can vary wildly depending upon the creator, the genre, and the relative importance of the author’s ecological intent. Deeply impressionistic works like the poems in Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* can often cover the same territory as more straightforward and impassioned pieces like Mary Hunter Austin’s 1903 book *The Land of Little Rain*; both offer a variation of the message that, beyond basic needs, humans should not be afforded any natural rights. London expressed similar views in his speculative fiction through what Jeremiah Creedon, in “The Call of Jack London” (2000), described as a wryly analytical means of “peel[ing] back the layers of culture” and “searching for some basic truth about the human animal” (Creedon n.p.). Creedon’s essay is an account of his discovery of London’s *Martin Eden*, which led, in turn, to a deeper understanding of London’s breadth as an author and the fluidity with which he could compose works in different genres. “London anticipated many current interests;” Creedon reports, “evolutionary psychology, for instance, and ethology, the study of animal behavior. At the heart of his work is a very modern understanding that humans are simply another life form, bound like all others to this island in the cosmic sea” (Creedon n.p.). To portray this understanding, London employed literary devices like personification, deliberately ineffective language, ecological ambiguity, and symbolic portrayals of entanglement, entrapment, or isolation. These approaches add up to an ecocritical viewpoint that is as broad in scope as any in early twentieth century American literature: reverent, intelligent, spiritual, and filled with humor and excitement.

In “Jack London, Aesthetic Theory, and Nineteenth-Century Popular Science” (1997), Barbara Lindquist discusses the personification in London’s speculative fiction, and the way it is often used to connect his stories to the settings from which they spring. London, she says, “depicts the artist in a reciprocal relationship with nature in which each alternately transforms the

other into organic and inorganic energy” (Lindquist 105). This relationship is frequently presented in a manner that foreshadows the story’s outcome by describing an environment that sometimes appears to be reacting in some way to the behavior of its occupants. In “When the World Was Young,” for example, when Dave Slotter, the hapless, would-be home invader, trespasses onto James Ward’s property and is greeted by Ward, in the form of an unhinged wild man, London describes the encounter as if Ward were literally manifesting out of the wilderness itself. Emphasis is given to the pine needles in Ward’s beard and the goat-skin tunic on his torso; he rises, “soft and alive” out of the foliage, drawing comparison to everything from a “frightened calf or fawn to a belligerent lion” (“When the World Was Young” 545). Ward is immediately linked to the natural world around him; thus, his struggle to make it through modern day San Francisco—to adapt—becomes equated with the continuous clash between two ways of life: the urban and the idyllic.

The landscape takes on similar human characteristics in “The Strength of the Strong” and “Planchette,” reflecting the activity and behavior in each story in ways that alert the reader as to the relative fruitlessness of the plight of the respective main characters. The perpetually confused, postapocalyptic neo-Neanderthals in “The Strength of the Strong” attempt to build and sustain a workable new society in a landscape that London describes in this manner: “At their backs yawned the black mouth of a cave, out of which, from time to time, blew draughty gusts of wind” (“The Strength of the Strong” 529). This description, of an environment that seems almost to be yawning and sighing bemusedly at its inhabitants, suggests an indifferent, dismissive natural world, one that has no investment whatsoever in all these desperately squabbling families moving back and forth upon it. By contrast, the world around Lute and Chris in “Planchette” appears almost *too* invested in their misadventures. London describes the

air as “palpitant with its presence”; the flowers shyly, almost guiltily supply Lute with “quick pleasure-thrills;” the barren earth stubbornly “denie[s] lodgement” to the grass and trees (“Planchette” 240). Just as the land’s utter indifference to the series of property battles between tribes in “The Strength of the Strong” was no surprise, based on the description of the land in the tale, so it is that the landscape’s final betrayal of Lute and Chris in “Planchette” is an act that seems to have been preordained almost from the story’s first moments. Lute and Chris were doomed from the outset to fall prey to the prophecy foretold by their encounter with the Ouija board; the world around them seemed acutely aware of this, even if they did not.

The eeriest example of personification in London’s speculative fiction may be his description of the unearthly hum that draws Bassett deep into the woods in “The Red One.” The sound that the red one emits is equated with that of a newborn baby: “Slowly it withdrew, sob by sob, into whatever great bosom had birthed it, until it whimpered deadly whispers of wrath and as equally seductive whispers of delight, striving still to be heard, to convey some cosmic secret, some understanding of infinite import and value” (“The Red One” 265). Such a description gives the uneasy impression that Bassett is embarking on his fateful quest with no less lofty a purpose than to experience a sort of *rebirth* out there in the unexplored wilderness. London continually describes Baratta, the aborigine woman with whom Bassett begrudgingly mates, with some of the most repulsed, offensive invective imaginable, and saves his most reverent, borderline erotic language for the grass that grows at the edge of the jungle:

...sweet, soft, tender, pasture grass that would have delighted the eyes and beasts of any husbandman and that extended, on and on, for leagues and leagues of velvet verdure, to the backbone of the great island, the towering mountain range flung up by some ancient

earth-cataclysm, serrated and gullied but not yet erased by the erosive tropic rains. But the grass! (267).

As Bassett continues on his single-minded quest to discover the secret of the red one, often viewing the natives he encounters along the way as nothing more than minor obstacles to be swatted aside, London's tale becomes a cautionary one, warning against the folly of rushing headlong where no others have trod—of, quite literally, neglecting to see the forest for the trees. The foreign landscape that claims Bassett forever at the end of “The Red One” was never, at any moment, anything more or less than exactly what it was. Bassett's downfall was that he refused to let himself believe that.

In “What is Ecocriticism?” (1994), Christopher Cokinós defines ecocriticism as a form of “ethical criticism” that deemphasizes “approaches that strictly privilege language and the difficulty of referentiality . . . [in favor of] approaches that re-emphasize the real work of words in a world of consequence, joy, and despair” (Cokinós n.p.). Much of Jack London's speculative fiction utilized language not simply as a means of communication, but as an ecological tool. Some characters manufacture and employ language to adapt to their environments, to forge personal connections, and to come up with an easy, convenient reason for conflict, while other characters suffer due to the ineffectiveness of the language that they employ—their refusal or inability to communicate in any kind of meaningful or progressive way. Another reason for Bassett's demise, in “The Red One,” is his impatience with the language of the jungle tribe that he encounters; his brusque disrespect for their primary means of communicating essentially tells them all they need to know about his character. Bassett refers condescendingly to the “psychological simplicities and lingual difficulties” of the tribal language, smugly congratulating himself for learning it and viewing it as nothing more than a means for the “addle-headed”

tribespeople to exchange gossip (“The Red One” 268). In “When the World Was Young,” the college-age James Ward exhibited fluency in Teutonic German—in “haunting reminiscences of word-forms...which his trained intuition told him were true and real”—that awed his instructor (“When the World Was Young” 547). When it became apparent that Ward knew next to nothing about this language, however, his instructor sharply turned on him, viewing him as arrogant, selfish, and worthy of scorn, a man of “monstrous selfishness for not giving him a glimpse of this wonderful screed that was older than the oldest any philologist had ever known or dreamed” (92). Such language-based conflicts, misunderstandings, and misinterpretations are commonplace in London’s speculative fiction. London frequently uses language as a shorthand means of illustrating man’s unwillingness or inability to bridge the gaps between lands, cultures, and races. Ineffective language, in these cases, can spawn rivalries, resentments, and even wars.

In dystopian tales like “The Strength of the Strong” and “The Scarlet Plague,” what remains of human language is depicted not only as a product of the environment but as a reflection of it. “It was a great talk we had,” mutters Long Beard in “The Strength of the Strong,” trying to recall and articulate how people communicated in his youth, “and it was a hard talk, for we did not have the words then as now with which to talk” (“The Strength of the Strong” 531). The simple act of communication is arduous and archaic, a difficult act that young people deride as unnecessary and worthy of mockery. “Why do you say so much that ain’t got no sense?” snaps Edwin to Granser, the hapless elderly narrator of “The Scarlet Plague,” while his friend Hare-Lip pokes fun at the “gabble the old geezer makes” (“The Scarlet Plague” 345). Granser’s speech is described as “approximately an English that had gone through a bath of corrupt usage . . . in these rambling soliloquies his English seemed to recrudescence into better construction and phraseology. But when he talked directly with the boys it lapsed, largely, into

their own uncouth and simpler forms” (341). Granser, a former professor, is ridiculed when he attempts to speak in any semblance of the educated English of his youth; in order to forge any sort of connection in his new environment, he has no choice but to speak in the blunt, crude language of the world around him—and in so doing, with every utterance, becomes further and further removed from the man he used to be.

“The Unparalleled Invasion,” London’s frenzied, fantastic account of China run amok after the “Japanese-Russian War” that climaxes with a clash of biological weaponry between China and the U.S., bases its entire conflict on miscommunication, misunderstanding, and language that fails at expressing kinship and common ground. Between the U.S. and China “WAS NO COMMON PSYCHOLOGICAL SPEECH,” the tale’s narrator fumes at the outset, relying upon capital letters to accentuate China’s otherness; “there was no intimate vocabulary . . . it was all a matter of language” (“The Unparalleled Invasion” 537). London’s descriptive language grows uncomfortably xenophobic as his parable of China as an out-of-control superpower continues; the country is eventually personified as a primitive, “howling wilderness,” removed from its more civilized neighboring countries by “differentiations brought about by diverse conditions and infusions of other blood,” retreating from confrontation and progress “like a turtle into her shell” (539). In this story, modern man’s inability to communicate, and to celebrate shared heritage and ancestry, is what ultimately leads to its explicit, nightmarish ruin; when the U.S. does finally achieve victory over China, the details that London chooses to employ are evocative of farmers combating a diseased crop. The “dark and threatening . . . war-cloud” that was China was extinguished through “a tremendous and successful experiment in cross-fertilization . . . in the coldest weather” that “destroyed [China’s] natural defences against the plagues” (539). The final impression left by this dystopian tale is

that of the U.S., unable to communicate with China through any sort of conventional means, resorting to overcoming China by literally turning its own land against it. In “The Unparalleled Invasion,” the environment itself becomes a grimly effective weapon.

In *Ecoambiguity: Environmental Crises and East Asian Literatures* (2012), Karen Thornber discusses how even London’s genre fiction was often permeated with the idea of the Yellow Peril, that xenophobic, stereotypical belief—prominent at the onset of the twentieth century—that those of Asian descent were little more than sinister interlopers out to overthrow the white race. Thornber also accuses London of ecoambiguity, which she defines as the construction of “barriers of isolation, insularity, and exceptionalism” between human societies and ecosystems that only serve to perpetuate stereotypes and eschew any ideas of shared natural experiences or beliefs (4). “Our sense of reality, our understandings of who we are and of our relationships with our surroundings, generally are constructed around stories,” Thornber stresses, which “have the capacity to awaken, reinforce, and redirect environmental concern and creative thinking about environmental futures” (5). Thornber holds up “The Unparalleled Invasion” as a negative, racist example of ecoambiguity. Never in the story do the Chinese rise above their one-dimensional, sub-human collective characterization; indeed, the country of China itself is presented as a character of menacing sentience. “China smiled and waited,” London stated, describing a battle between Chinese and European military forces. “She mobilized five times as many millions of her militia and awaited the invasion . . . Did they think to tire her out, or starve her out? China smiled again” (“The Unparalleled Invasion” 538). Comparing London’s depiction of China as a land of single-minded savages with similarly apocalyptic works of East Asian literature in which the western nations are presented as the barbaric aggressors, Thornber notes that the end results are always the same: all people are implicated, and “people must

participate in efforts to forestall the very disasters described” (Thornber 371). “The Unparalleled Invasion” climaxes with starvation, cannibalism, and genocide; its final moments depict mankind’s slow recovery thanks to what London calls a “vast and happy intermingling of nationalities (“The Unparalleled Invasion” 539). The ecoambiguous vision that London presents in this tale is one of the bleakest that he ever told, one of a world that must be brought nearly to extinction before it can begin to thrive. The environment is such a significant part of this story that no human characters are even necessary for the author’s ostensible points to be made about civilization’s primitive, destructive tendencies.

Thornber further defines London’s ecoambiguity as “ambivalent attitudes towards nature; confusion about the actual condition of the nonhuman . . . contradictory human behaviors towards ecosystems; and discrepancies among attitudes, conditions, and behaviors that lead to actively downplaying and acquiescing to nonhuman degradation, as well as to inadvertently harming the very environments one is attempting to protect” (Thornber 7). “A Thousand Deaths” and *The Star Rover* are two other works by London that also qualify as environmentally ambiguous under this definition, but do so in more intriguing, progressive ways. Both tales are steeped in uncertainty, with main characters who begin their stories with one mindset and conclude them with another one entirely; *The Star Rover*’s Darrell Standing and the nameless protagonist of “A Thousand Deaths” possess views of the natural world that end up altered considerably, depending upon their places within that natural world.

When “A Thousand Deaths” begins, its narrator is at odds with nature, describing his “cold, exhausted . . . maddening” ocean journey that almost results in his demise (“A Thousand Deaths” n.p.). Grateful for his survival, and for his escape from the “great agony” that was life among the elements, the narrator immerses himself in the macabre scientific world of his

rescuers, merrily allowing himself to be killed and resurrected on a regular basis as part of their experiments on artificial respiration (n.p.). When the narrator finally does rebel, employing a makeshift magnetic laser to dispatch everyone around him and burn a swath to freedom, he is suddenly thrilled to be making his return to the natural world. He likens the death of his mad scientist father to “the wind sighing among the pines” and rejoices at the sight of the “wide world [that] lay before [him]” (n.p.). Over the course of only a few pages, the main character of “A Thousand Deaths” has evolved from a weary, and wary, traveler who vastly prefers reason to emotion and the laboratory to the outdoors into someone who views nature as synonymous with freedom, escape, and opportunity. The story’s final moments see him shaking off his ambiguity along with his shackles, rejecting the claustrophobic, pain-filled existence as a scientific guinea pig and gratefully returning to the “long peregrination” that he had initially regarded as unfulfilling (n.p.). It took a life that was filled, quite literally, with constant death and suffering to reawaken the narrator’s appreciation of nature, and of the value of coexisting with it.

Darrell Standing, the main character of London’s novel *The Star Rover*, experiences something very close to the exact opposite transformation. *The Star Rover* is one of London’s most carefully, self-consciously constructed works. The novel’s first several chapters succeed to an almost uncomfortable degree in conveying an air of oppressive claustrophobia; in narrating his plight, Standing uses short, staccato sentences and almost ritualistically repeats evocative words like “mad,” “lonely,” and “solitary.” Once he finally does start escaping his cell—at least mentally, via the mysterious “jacket”—the descriptive, effusive language begins pouring out of him. Standing breathlessly describes the “little narrow-gauge train where the straggly village stood beside the big dry creek, and got into the buckboard behind my mountain horses, and drove hour by hour past all the old familiar landmarks to my alfalfa meadows . . . where my rotated

crops of corn and barley and clover were ripe for harvesting” (*The Star Rover* 484). The environment of his imagined past lives ennobles and energizes him, at least initially, but as his time in confinement grows ever more oppressive, Standing’s escapes grow darker, until one of his past life representatives describes the world around him in this manner:

Not alone was the light of this setting sun ominous, but everything about me seemed ominous—the landscape, my father’s face, the fret of the babe in my mother’s arms that she could not still, the six horses my father drove that had continually to be urged and that were without any sign of color, so heavily had the dust settled on them...the landscape was an aching, eye-hurting desolation (377).

Standing finds himself unable to receive any solace in the natural world, as it begins to blend in with the world from which he strives so mightily to escape. Eventually, the environment of his imaginings becomes just as oppressive and claustrophobic as the cell—and the jacket—in which he is confined, until even the colors lose all their luster and distinctiveness and become indistinguishable from the depressing gray of his cell walls.

The grimness of Standing’s regressions and escapes continues; the land becomes increasingly hostile, and Standing becomes more aware of the inhumane conditions in which he finds himself. In one of his final past life experiences, as a seal hunter who shipwrecks on an uninhabited island, he descends into madness due to starvation, exhaustion, and isolation. In another, he rages furiously against the “creeping, crawling, squalling things” of the natural world that he fears will destroy him and curses the “bleak backbone of the world” (397). Death, as opposed to living in environments like these, seems almost like a relief. Standing’s hatred and distrust of nature are such that he even spends his final moments complaining about California’s long, hot summers and insisting that, in the old days, “we were clean, I tell you . . . It required

man, with his imagination, aided by his mastery of matter, to invent the deadly sins. The lesser animals, the other animals, are incapable of sin” (426). Confused, addled, deluded, in denial of his crimes, Standing fabricates, in his imagined past lives, visions of a world so ugly that he looks forward to leaving it. As his natural life is about to end, Standing thinks scornfully of his previous existences among nature as an adventurer of mountain and sea, speaks of the “infinite relief” that his tiny jail cell provides, and describes how he “felt like a lost child returned home again” inside his four cramped walls (424). “All that kept the vastness of space, like a monster, from pouncing upon me were those good stout walls of mine,” he declares, mere moments away from mounting a scaffold, donning a hangman’s hood, and experiencing the most claustrophobic and confining end imaginable (424). The most ironic aspect of Darrell Standing’s ignominious death may be the fact that, presented with a myriad of lives among nature from which to choose for his final moments, he selects the one in which nature plays no part.

Granser, the mournful character at the heart of “The Scarlet Plague,” possesses a similar ambiguous relationship to the natural world, admitting to a “distant kinship” between his language and that of another nomad tribe and attributing the lack of basic communication between tribes to their overall disharmony. He muses disdainfully about the “monosyllables and short jerky sentences . . . more a gibberish than a language” spoken by the younger tribe members, and declares that “the human race is doomed to slink back farther and farther into the primitive night ere again it begins its bloody climb upward to civilization . . . in another generation you will be perforating your noses and ears and wearing ornaments of bone and shell” (“The Scarlet Plague” 331). Like Bassett in “The Red One,” Granser remains too obtuse to contemplate the notion that simply adapting to the new, altered world around him—the world in which he is now a stranger—might improve his station within it. Indeed, if there is one character

trait that Granser, Bassett, Darrell Standing, Lute and Chris from “Planchette,” and the tribal people from *Before Adam* share—with each other and with many other characters from Jack London’s fiction—it may be their wrongheaded, intractable anthropocentrism. Bert Bender identifies London as a vital ecological writer because of his “emphasis on the ways we have threatened the environment” and “insistence that we can and must adapt by imagining new, sustainable ways of life” (“Darwin and Ecology” 131). London himself insisted that he “expressed much of [his] heart toward the land” in his fiction and non-fiction (*Letters* 1590). But, characteristically, London eloquently clarified his viewpoint by devising characters whose own mentalities—on science, on race, on faith, and on the environment—contrasted jarringly with his.

Ultimately, the flawed characters at the heart of much of London’s speculative fiction, unable to read the warning signs of the natural world, are punished through isolation or displacement—sometimes literal, sometimes symbolic. In “The Red One,” Bassett spends his final seconds of life contemplating the steps he took that led him to a painful end in the forest dwelling that he dubbed, with typical insensitivity, an “infamously dark and evil-stinking devil-devil house” (“The Red One” 275). Darrell Standing, moments before his execution, desperately tries to convince himself that the real world is just as much of a fabrication as his past lives and that he is “like a child about to start on a journey” (*The Star Rover* 518). The character of Lute in “Planchette,” having just helplessly watched her lover plummet to his death, ends the story standing transfixed at the edge of a mountain path, solitary and abandoned, with “nothing else but waiting left for her to do,” keenly aware of “man’s inheritance from the wild and howling ages when his hairy, apelike prototype was afraid of the dark and personified the elements into things of fear” (“Planchette” 258). Even the explorers in “A Relic of the Pliocene” speak

sorrowfully of the people in the Klondike who spend their days “wandering like lost soul[s] through great vastnesses and unknown deeps” (“A Relic of the Pliocene” 323). Thomas Stevens, the hunter who spins the yarn about his battle with a woolly mammoth, answers every question about where his struggle took place by vaguely waving his hand or gesturing in some far-off direction, suggesting that the answers lie ever farther, ever out of reach, and that, in order to find them, all of these lost souls might need to wander forever.

“The Strength of the Strong” and *Before Adam* both take on isolation and abandonment as major driving forces of their narratives. The entirety of “The Strength of the Strong” could be read as a parable that describes the dangers of isolation. Long Beard, the tale’s narrator and protagonist, describes his arduous youth, detailing how his tribe, and all his neighboring tribes, were initially segregated, and lived miserably: perpetually hungry, sick, and vulnerable. “We were a very foolish crowd,” he recalls. “We did not know the secret of strength. For, behold, each family lived by itself, and took care of itself . . . we got no strength from one another. We were in fear of each other all the time” (“The Strength of the Strong” 533). All the families eventually banded together, briefly, until corruption took over, class systems developed, and one of the elders was executed for daring to suggest that peace might be achieved if everyone added “our strength and their strength together” so that “the strength of each man will be the strength of all men in the world” (535). Long Beard’s reminiscence concludes on a gloomy note, as he surveys the despair and destitution that surround him, brought upon by the tribes’ inability to coexist, and wistfully hopes for that time again when “all men will be brothers” (535). The discord among Long Beard’s tribe and all the others stems from their uncomprehending, disrespectful, ultimately ambiguous relationship with nature; “most of us did not care about the land,” he laments (531).

The narrator of *Before Adam* recounts a similarly conflicted, tragic struggle between the fear of one's environment and the pleasure that comes from dwelling peacefully in it and establishing a relationship with it. He mentions his nagging childhood dreams of being trapped in a nest, wracked with "confusion and nightmare," fearful of "the space that lurked just beneath me" that is filled with "strange forms and ferocious happenings" (*Before Adam* 24). Despite these crushing, oppressive visions of entrapment and claustrophobia, the narrator and his fellow tribespeople retreat almost obsessively to their cave dwellings at any sign of trouble, relying upon the sense of safety and security that these small, dark spaces ostensibly provide. Only gradually do they begin to realize what this willful isolation is costing them. The story's narrator watches out his cave entrance as a member of a rival tribe fishes in a stream—failing spectacularly at first, then succeeding—and experiences a pang of loss and missed opportunity: "At first the episode seemed merely funny to me. But when one of the vagrant impulses of fear, common in that age of perpetual insecurity, moved within me, I was struck with my own loneliness" (32). The tribespeople move towards establishing some form of community and start banding together to adapt and learn to thrive in their surrounding environment, but these gestures end up coming too late, and they are quickly moved against by a savage rival tribe. Fleeing desperately back into their caves, the narrator and his friends find themselves trapped, and are gruesomely set upon. The story's final passages paint a grim portrait of a displaced people, forced together by circumstance, utterly unable to forge any sort of meaningful connection, with each other or with the natural world:

For untold ages, oppressed by protean fear, I am aware of wandering, endlessly wandering, through a dank and soggy wilderness, where poisonous snakes struck at us, and animals roared around us, and the mud quaked under us and sucked at our heels . . .

we do not sing and chatter and laugh. We play no pranks. For once our volatile and exuberant spirits are hopelessly subdued. We make plaintive, querulous noises, look at one another, and cluster close together. It is like the meeting of the handful of survivors after the day of the end of the world (74).

Bender points out that “London (like many post-Darwinian novelists before and after him) occasionally insinuated imagery of entanglement in order to suggest Darwin’s well-known figure of ‘an entangled bank’” (“Darwin and Ecology” 126). However, Darwin’s memorably peaceful, hopeful metaphor of the organic world as an entangled bank upon which every form of creature or living thing is happily intertwined is sharply contrasted by the entanglement London depicts in much of his speculative fiction. In the fictional worlds that London created, characters are entangled in a manner that *entraps* them. Granser is entangled by his reluctance to adapt to his new world’s language. The cave people in *Before Adam* are entangled by their inaction when faced with the task of forging a community. Darrell Standing, Bassett, and Lute are entangled by their paralyzing fear of man’s mortality. Many of the characters in London’s speculative fiction reside in a natural world filled with an abundance of space, freedom, and opportunity, but they are still trapped by their inability to achieve an understanding with that natural world. They are entangled, ultimately, by their anthropocentrism.

In *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (1982), Murray Bookchin states that “the notion that man is destined to dominate nature is . . . almost completely alien to the outlook of so-called primitive or preliterate communities . . . the concept emerged very gradually from a broader social development: the increasing domination of human by human” (*The Ecology of Freedom* 43). From an ecocritical perspective, this social development is the subject of most of Jack London’s speculative fiction. Stories like “The

Strength of the Strong,” “Planchette,” “The Red One” and *Before Adam* highlight the perils that accompany the modern concept of man’s aggressive attempts to assert dominance over nature, often just as eloquently as London’s more naturalistic fiction pieces like “To Build a Fire.” These stories also exemplify the depth and complexity of ecocriticism as a critical theory and effectively demonstrate the ecocritical richness of much of London’s work. They illustrate the value that would be inherent in addressing London’s speculative fiction from an ecocritical perspective in the college classroom, and reveal the complexity, intelligence, and sincerity—the “unrenumerative soul-stuff,” as Charmian London put it—that his work contains.

A college course on American literature could conceivably use the fiction of Jack London not only to introduce ecocritical theory, but to present it with an appropriately multi-faceted level of complexity. Many American naturalist writers, concerned as they were with the social influence of place and the environment, can be considered from an ecocritical perspective; writers as diverse as Thoreau, Whitman, Stephen Crane, and Hamlin Garland have composed works that celebrated nature and advocated its preservation. Well-known pieces by London like *The Call of the Wild* (1903), as well as lesser-known works like *The Cruise of the Snark* (1911), can also be viewed ecocritically, as they fulfill the requirements that David Mazel laid out in “Regionalism and Ecology” (2003): analyzing literature “as though nature mattered” (Mazel 130). Mazel suggests that the ecocritical mindset can manifest as “an aesthetic appreciation of the beauty and ‘rightness’ of nature, and an ethical compulsion to minimize environmental damage by living more ‘naturally’” (129). What differentiates Jack London’s work from that of his naturalist peers is the fact that many of his speculative stories, like *Before Adam*, “A Relic of the Pliocene,” and “The Red One,” not only expressed an appreciation of nature and a desire to

right man's wrongs against it, but also pondered a hypothetical future in which man, having mistreated or neglected the natural world, is now actively paying the price for it.

In the mournful final passages of *Before Adam*, the narrator describes a miserable environment full of filth, mud, overgrown trees and toxic air. "It was not a happy abiding-place," he laments. "The air was raw and chill, and we suffered continually from coughing and colds. We could not survive in such an environment" (*Before Adam* 73). The blame for this toxic environment is assigned to the onslaught of "transient floods," gaseous swamplands, interloping wild animals, and a "radical change in our diet" due to a lack of fresh vegetables (73). Basically, the land in *Before Adam* is damaged because its inhabitants have taken it for granted. If, as ecocritical scholars like Cheryll Glofelty and Laurence Buell emphasize, two necessary aspects of ecocriticism are its commitment to the environmental issues of its time, and its encouragement of some form of environmental activism, then London's speculative fiction is unique among that of his peers in its blunt, alarmist approach. London's speculative work offers a vision of how the world will look in the future, and the suffering that will result, if man continues his abuse of nature. In this way, many of London's early twentieth century speculative fiction stories serve as examples of what Patrick D. Murphy described, in *Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and Cultural Studies* (2009), as "stories that emphasize analogy between imagined worlds and the reader's consensual world" (Murphy 89). "Rather than providing the alibi of a fantasy," Murphy continues, ecocritical speculative fiction announces that "the present and the future are interconnected. What we do now will be reflected in the future, and, therefore, we have no alibi for avoiding addressing the results of our actions today" (89). Murphy refers to relatively modern works like Frank Herbert's *Dune* tales or the stories of Ursula K. Le Guin when listing examples of this type of ecocritical science fiction. Specifically,

Murphy highlights Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest* (1972), a tale of alien invasion that can be read as an allegory of the Vietnam War, pointing out the way that the novel pits "colonizers against colonized" and "inhabitants against interlopers" and elucidating speculative fiction's "strong potential to function as parable addressing the issue of how people become inhabitants and what it means to be indigenous in relation to environmental responsibility and the mutual adaptation between humans and the rest of nature" (94). London's speculative tales like *Before Adam*, "The Strength of the Strong," and "The Red One" offer very specific views of life after ecological devastation that mirror those presented in the science fiction of Le Guin and Herbert. As such, London's environmentally alert speculative fiction bridges the distance between past and present, and supplies evidence of how far we as a society have—or have not—advanced in our treatment of the natural world.

In "'Never Travel Alone': Naturalism, Jack London, and the White Silence," Jeanne Campbell Reesman describes how London "evolved a scientific rationale" for including the mind and soul in the natural order, primarily based upon his reading of Herbert Spencer and Ernst Haeckel, and "was thus able to reject a materialism that denied the existence of spirit and to reject a spiritualism that dispensed with the notion of matter" ("Never Travel Alone" 37). The conflicts between man and nature, indigent and interloper, and colonizer and colonized depicted in much of London's ecologically driven speculative fiction are fueled by the need to *reject*. In "When the World Was Young," the character of James Ward represents a rejection of the modern urban society by the wild, unfettered, undisciplined past. The characters in "The Strength of the Strong" and *Before Adam* are rejected by their own landscapes after they attempt to impose rules upon them. Darrell Standing, in *The Star Rover*, is too deeply entrenched in his own delusions to achieve any sort of meaningful connection with any of the natural worlds

through which he passes en route to his execution, and Bassett, in “The Red One,” remains exasperatingly obdurate in the presence of a jungle tribe, refusing to adjust his perspective or address his prejudices towards the natives and their land. “There is a magic in the northland night that steals in on one like fevers from malarial marshes,” the narrator utters near the beginning of “A Relic of the Pliocene,” and in each one of the tales listed above, Jack London has constructed a place suffused with a sense of magic, mystery, and genuine wonder (“A Relic of the Pliocene” 326). The conflicts come when his characters attempt to reshape these places to their own whims, desires, and biases. In *White Fang*, London likens the quiet wilderness to “the masterful and incommunicable wisdom of eternity laughing at the futility of life and the effort of life” (*White Fang* 1). In his speculative fiction, he creates characters with no sense of understanding that the wilderness will continue laughing, and abiding as it will, in spite of all their attempts to remold it. In so doing, he has made the stories he tells in his speculative fiction enduringly cautionary ones.

“Memorable literature repays attention from succeeding generations in its capacity to speak to new readers in their own terms on issues which, nowadays, are unavoidably ecological,” says Glen Love. “Human/nature interrelationships that are at the social forefront today may reveal something of their underlying importance, even universality, through their presence in earlier literary works that now open themselves to our reinterpretation” (Love 11-12). One of the principal appeals of speculative fiction as a genre is the way that its impact and relevance fluctuate over time—stories that initially work as escapist bits of social satire often evolve into prescient societal allegories, and vice versa. London’s speculative fiction tales are unique in their sweeping appeal, over a century after their initial publication, as social satire, effective storytelling, and cautionary tales of alternate worlds, all at once. His work continues to endure

not as that of what his detractors called an occasionally inspired hack, but as that of what Charmian London described as a chronicler of “straight, unvarnished Truth.” As this chapter has illustrated, the complexity and accuracy of that Truth is only just beginning to come into focus. This is why the depth of Jack London’s legacy as a speculative fiction writer needs to be made into a lasting, contributory part of his overall legacy. His work displays, again and again, a keen understanding of things that are not, but which might be, or ought to be.

CONCLUSION

Upon discovering the work of Carl Jung, Jack London breathlessly proclaimed to his wife Charmain his impression that he was “standing on the edge of a world so new, so terrible, so wonderful, that I am almost afraid to look over into it” (*Letters* xxiii). With mounting excitement, London described his new foray into the world of psychoanalysis and the human mind, rhetorically asking “if [he] could learn to analyze the secret soul-stuff of the individual and bring it up to the light of foreconsciousness, could [he] not analyze the soul of the race, back and back, ever farther into the shadows, to its murky beginnings?” (xxiii). It is clear that London’s intentions, with regard to his speculative fiction, were nothing if not lofty. As Donna Campbell put it, he spent the whole of his literary life concerned not only with “changing the course of American literature,” but “bust[ing] through the circumlocutions of genteel fiction” (qtd. in Barringer n.p.). London’s own legacy was important to him. How his work was received—and perceived—by the public was important to him. America’s eastern literary establishment tended to regard him as more of a celebrity than a writer, “famous for what he did and what he was about to do” (Barringer n.p.). Although London did cultivate and enjoy the level of celebrity he achieved, he remained driven towards achieving notoriety through his work rather than his behavior. Alex Kershaw’s 1984 biography *Jack London: A Life* quotes him as declaring that “some are born to fortune and some have fortune thrust upon them . . . in my case I was clubbed into fortune, and bitter necessity wielded the club” (qtd. in Kershaw 74). Throughout his career, London wrote fiction and non-fiction that kept an eye on the frontier as, in the words of Frederick Jackson Turner, “the soil which took the mixed seeds which fell upon it and transformed them into something new and distinctive, the American race” (Turner 121). London strove not only to chronicle that frontier successfully, and accurately, but also to forge a new

frontier—one that had heretofore been undocumented, and unknown, with boundaries that would prove to be limitless.

Campbell memorably describes London, early in his career, giving a short reading of Henry James to a small audience. Midway through one particularly “sinuous” passage, London stopped abruptly, slammed his book down upon his podium, and bellowed, “Do any of you know what this is about?” (qtd. in Barringer n.p.). London was, as Jeanne Campbell Reesman states in “‘Never Travel Alone’: Naturalism, Jack London, and the White Silence” (1997), regarded by the uninitiated as a “thief, brawler, drinker, sponge, grubber, obsessive, depressive: it must seem to the reader of such naively naturalistic descriptions that if London ever managed to write a good story, it was merely by accident” (“Never Travel Alone” 35). London was aware of his somewhat rough-and-tumble reputation, and he was fueled by his desire to transcend it. It was of utmost importance to him that his audience “know what this is about.” Inspired in his writing by the likes of Kipling and Conrad, he desired to serve as a similar inspiration to those who succeeded him. What remains unheralded, even to this day, is how heavily influential his speculative fiction proved to be. George Orwell has explicitly listed London as among his greatest inspirations, and the pioneering, early twentieth century science fiction by the likes of Olaf Stapledon, Karel Capek, and Yevgeny Zamyatin all owe a significant debt to London’s speculative work. Words and phrases like “dystopia,” “robot,” and *Homo superior* are essential parts of any class or scholarly discussion of science fiction as literature. All of these words and phrases can be traced back, to some degree, to Jack London.

Over the years, Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has become as obligatory a part of the college reading curriculum as something like *To Kill a Mockingbird*—indeed, the book has experienced a significant resurgence in popularity only recently. It is perhaps the most widely

known, and widely read, science fiction novel in existence, at least to date. It also owes that very existence to London's *The Iron Heel*. "Jack London," Orwell once said, "was an adventurer and a man of action as few writers have ever been . . . the excellence of his short stories has been almost forgotten" (qtd. in Lourie i). In "Prophecies of Fascism" (1940), an article in which he compared *The Iron Heel* to Huxley's *Brave New World*, Wells's *The Sleeper Awakes*, and Ernest Bramah's *The Secret of the League*, and praised all four texts for their seeming ability to foretell, to varying degrees, Hitler's rise to power, Orwell marveled at London's novel as "a tale of capitalist oppression . . . written at a time when various things that have made Fascism possible . . . were not easy to foresee" ("Prophecies of Fascism" 33). Orwell continued his praise of London, which takes up the majority of his article, in this fashion:

With his love of violence and physical strength, his belief in 'natural aristocracy,' his animal-worship and exaltation of the primitive, [London] had in him what some might fairly call a Fascist strain. This probably helped him to understand just how the possessing class would behave once they were seriously menaced ("Prophecies of Fascism" 33).

Orwell's deep admiration for *The Iron Heel* is palpable in this article, and his assessment of London's dystopian tale is astute; nine years later, he composed his own story about a futuristic, totalitarian, oppressive capitalist society and the lone, hesitant outcast who is prodded by romance into some form of rebellion. The inspiration is clear.

In his article "The Origins of Dystopia: Wells, Huxley and Orwell" (2010), Gregory Claeys lists the many SF novels of the early twentieth century that dealt with dystopian ideas, pointing out that "their common theme is the quasi-omnipotence of a monolithic, totalitarian state demanding and normally exacting complete obedience from its citizens, challenged

occasionally but usually ineffectually by vestigial individualism or systemic flaws, and relying upon scientific and technological advances to ensure social control” (Claeys 109). Humanity, at this time, suddenly found itself distinctly lacking in optimism and awash with a higher level of strength brought upon by these advancements, the specter of war and death hung over the human race, and literature took its cues accordingly. London’s *The Iron Heel* was among the first dystopian novels, and remains one of the most influential; George Orwell acknowledged its structural and thematic influence on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Before that, however, circa 1921, Russian novelist Yevgeny Zamyatin wrote *We* (1921), a dystopian satire so incendiary, and so critical of Soviet society, that the author had to smuggle it out of his home country for it to see publication. Zamyatin’s prose is fiery and his imagery is often frightening—people live in a gargantuan glass panopticon and the antagonists have indeterminate animal hair all over their bodies. His story, though, is essentially a gender-swapped *Iron Heel*: a desperate protagonist writes journal entries describing his oppression and his inability to rebel in any sort of meaningful way, until he meets a woman who turns out to be a major player in the resistance; love is what spurs the main character into action.

Orwell wrote a breathlessly enthusiastic review of *We* in 1946, in which he announced that “Zamyatin’s intuitive grasp of the irrational side of totalitarianism—human sacrifice, cruelty as an end in itself” made *We* a better book than *Brave New World* (“Review of *We*” 37). Orwell made no mention in his review of the influence of *The Iron Heel* upon Zamyatin’s story, but it is unmistakable, nevertheless. D-503 and I-330, the man and woman at the center of *We*, have a telling exchange early in the planning stages of their rebellion:

“There can’t be a revolution,” he says. “Our revolution was the last and there can never be another.”

“My dear,” she retorts, “you’re a mathematician: tell me, which is the last number?”

“Numbers are infinite. There can’t be a last one.”

“Then why do you talk about the last revolution?” (Zamyatin 186).

Similarly dexterous verbal exchanges occur in *The Iron Heel*, it seems, every few pages, as in an instance early on wherein Ernest Everhard tries to convince a local bishop that his parishioners are eager for rebellion, only for the bishop to bleat that men are not made for such actions.

“Are you discussing the ideal man?” Ernest asks, “—unselfish and godlike, and so few in numbers as to be practically non-existent, or are you discussing the common and ordinary average man?” When the bishop admits that he is referring to the common man, Ernest responds rhetorically, echoing one of the bishop’s early sermons: “Who is weak and fallible, prone to error?” (*The Iron Heel* 451). London’s Ernest Everhard and Zamyatin’s I-330 argue their points in the same sly, political, strategically confrontational way, using their sharp intelligence and fierce convictions to turn their opponents’ words around and use them in their own favor, to underline their own statements. They exude the same passion.

The plight of Ernest and Avis Everhard, the plight of D-503 and I-330, and the plight of Winston Smith and Julia, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, are virtually identical; their stories could all conceivably be taking place simultaneously, in different sections of the same vast totalitarian society. In his depiction of a faceless, oppressive, dystopian regime, Jack London was establishing the template for one of the most significant tropes in all of science fiction. *Big Brother* may have entered the literary vernacular in 1949 with the publication of Orwell’s masterwork, but he had been germinating for at least the previous four decades, back when Avis Everhard was still hard at work on the Everhard Manuscripts.

Another common theme in science fiction is the concept of *Homo superior*: the idea that there exists, or can be created, something greater than modern man. This concept, in genre fiction, reaches at least as far back as Shelley's tale of Frankenstein's monster, but the term itself was coined by Olaf Stapledon in his 1935 novel *Odd John*. Today, Stapledon is regarded as one of the formative creators of science fiction as we know it, due principally to the four novels he turned out during the 1930's: *Last and First Men* (1930), *Last Men in London* (1932), *Odd John*, and *Star Maker* (1937). Stapledon's SF work was epic in scope, story, and imagination, emerging from the author's own dedicated socialist beliefs, the teachings of Friedrich Nietzsche, and what he called a "huge and obvious" debt to H.G. Wells ("Two Letters to H.G. Wells" 279). In correspondence with Wells, Stapledon bluntly informed that author that "your works have influenced me very greatly . . . they have helped very many of us to see things more clearly," adding, "if I seem to have plagiarized from any others, it was in ignorance" (279). Stapledon certainly cannot be said to have "plagiarized" from Jack London, but as a fellow socialist and a contemporary of Wells, London was obviously a writer who existed on Stapledon's radar—and there are characters in Stapledon's work that, when viewed in comparison with London's speculative output, do bear a notable resemblance to some of his creations.

In *Odd John*, Stapledon's *Homo superior* is John Wainwright, an unusual little fellow who appears initially to be developmentally disabled. It is not until John is four years old that he learns to speak; shortly thereafter, he has mastered geometry, consumed virtually every book in his home, and is announcing that "all men are stupid" while also wondering "why are there only three dimensions? When I grow up shall I find more?" (*Odd John* 10). John's intelligence only grows from that point, and he eventually develops telepathic and psionic abilities, as well as a distinct, malicious streak of megalomania. "*Homo sapiens* is a spider trying to crawl out of a

basin,” he coldly proclaims. “The higher he crawls, the steeper the hill. Sooner or later, down he goes . . . to make them try to live beyond their capacity would be like trying to civilize a pack of monkeys . . . and that would be to waste my best powers. I might as well spend my life chicken-farming” (69). John eventually establishes an island colony for him and others like him, and when mercenaries attempt to invade, he destroys everything in one final, suicidal act of defiance. Vigorously impatient and wildly determined, Odd John calls to mind London’s Goliah. However, Goliah viewed his actions as altruistic, and humanity as worth saving; he strove to *force*, as violently as necessary, his idea of a socialist society on the human race. John, by contrast, makes no secret of his disdain for the *Homo sapien*; his only goals are freedom and solitude, and he thinks nothing of eradicating those who stand in the way of these goals. In this way, Odd John could be called the anti-Goliah.

Although London supplies next to nothing in the way of detail about Goliah the man, there are several qualities that Goliah and Odd John have in common: their extreme intelligence, their charisma, their eloquence, and the possibility that they both possess superhuman powers and abilities. Where they differ most significantly is in their respective views of humanity: Goliah has no patience for those who, in his mind, stand in the way of humanity; John, however, views humanity as standing in *his* way. Goliah annihilates those who defy or refuse to follow his instructions, usually in an aggressive manner; John calmly insists upon the self-annihilation of a group of natives that have the misfortune of inhabiting an island that he desires for himself. “There is more laughter in the United States these days, and there is more sense,” Goliah announces near his story’s end. “The fear of death made those in the high places get out of the way, that was all, and gave the intelligence of man a chance to realise itself socially” (“Goliah” 105). John displays no such positive, hopeful view of man’s intelligence. Man “shows no more

practical intelligence than a moth that has fluttered through a candle-flame once and will do so again as soon as it has recovered from the shock,” he says. “I must strike out on my own, and, if possible, in such a way as to avoid being smashed in the coming disaster” (*Odd John* 72). The strikingly disparate attitudes behind these separate quotes characterize the main difference between Goliah and Odd John: one holds out hope for mankind’s survival, while the other believes that his own survival can only occur if he removes himself from the rest of the human race.

This key factor in the dramatically different mindsets of Goliah and Odd John may be reflected in the time in which their stories were written: London wrote “Goliah” in 1910, and *Odd John* saw publication in 1935. There had been a world war in the meantime, and the effects of that conflict were still being felt. Stapledon himself was no great fan of the human race during this period; he viewed humanity as in a “horrid fix” and a “miserable war” and believed that “pacifism simply won’t work . . . how loathsome it all is!” (“Two Letters to H.G. Wells” 280). Odd John is disgusted with the *Homo sapiens* and believes that their self-destruction is inevitable; it may be that, had Goliah been a couple of decades later in his arrival, his own viewpoint would not have been too different.

Odd John Wainwright is not the sole Olaf Stapledon creation to bear some similarity to one of Jack London’s characters. *Last and First Men*, Stapledon’s elephantine, speculative account of the rise and fall of every human species over the course of hundreds of millions of years, is a daunting read, but as all the eighteen different species of men drift by, it is easy to spot some resemblance to the cave and tree-dwelling inhabitants of “The Strength of the Strong” and *Before Adam*. The Second Men, a particularly savage species whose “blond hirsute appearance” and hunting skills are emphasized, calls to mind James Ward from “When the World Was

Young.” Stapledon creates brief but vivid sketches of humans at various stages of physical, mental, and emotional evolution (or de-evolution, in some cases), striving always to be “a young-hearted people, simple, gay, vigorous and loyal,” but more often than not, succumbing to conflict in some form or another (*Last and First Men* 87). “We are ordinary folk,” Stapledon’s men assure themselves, time and time again. “But somehow we must become great” (92). These words evoke the sorrowful lament offered by Long Beard at the end of “The Strength of the Strong:” “Some day, all the fools will be dead and the live men will go forward . . . and all the high mountain valleys will be planted with corn and fat roots” (“The Strength of the Strong” 536). Although Stapledon’s text literally spans the entire galaxy, the final impression it leaves is one of quiet, individual regret. Like the characters in London’s tales, all the eighteen species of human in *Last and First Men* desire nothing other than to “excel the noble but unfortunate type which [they] had achieved once, long ago, with the first species, in certain pre-historic cave-dwelling hunters and artists” (*Last and First Men* 100). But they remain unable to learn from their history, and thus they cannot overcome it. Long Beard, the Cave People from *Before Adam*, and all of Stapledon’s species of men fight, struggle, and work to better themselves, and to evolve, but they remain predisposed to conflict, and in every instance, that is what proves to be their undoing.

In their cautionary parables about oppressive, totalitarian futuristic societies, George Orwell and Yevgeny Zamyatin took inspiration from London’s *The Iron Heel*. In his detailed accounts of heroes and villains at various levels of the evolutionary chain, Olaf Stapledon was influenced by aspects of “The Strength of the Strong,” *Before Adam*, “When the World Was Young,” and “Goliah.” London’s influence can perhaps be the most clearly seen, however, in the science fiction of Czech Nobel Prize nominee Karel Capek, whose 1920 play “R.U.R.” not

only introduced the word “robot” to the English language, but also took on as its theme one of Jack London’s most prominent and most commonly espoused ideas: the triumph of reason.

“R.U.R.,” which stands for “Rossum’s Universal Robots,” is, quite simply, a dramatic account of the human race’s destruction by robots. The play opens in media res and unfolds as a series of flashbacks, flash-forwards, framing devices, and at least one hasty monologue that fills in further background and historical detail; in this way, it is structurally similar to *The Iron Heel* and *The Star Rover*, two London narratives that achieve maximum suspense and a faster overall pace by unspooling in an unconventional fashion. The robot takeover is already virtually underway at the beginning of Act One; information about how they came to be, and how they came to power, is distributed in a piecemeal manner as Capek keeps his story driving forward. When Helena, the play’s main character, expresses her pity for the robots, Nana, her maid, interrupts her with a hateful snarl.

NANA: ...Everyone hates them, it isn’t possible not to. Even this dog hates them, won’t take a scrap of meat from them; sticks out his tail, he does, and howls as soon as he gets the smell of them.

HELENA: A dog doesn’t have reason.

NANA: He’s better than what they are, Nana. He knows perfectly well it was God what made him and that he’s better than they are. (Capek n.p.)

The idea of reason, of common sense, as an equalizing factor appears early in Act One and resonates throughout the play, as the human characters scramble to find some way to prepare for a world dominated by robots. The fact that the audience is already aware of the robots’ victory lends this desperation a preordained, pathetic air; none of the frantic onstage activity will make any sort of difference. Jack London structured *The Star Rover* and *The Iron Heel* to begin at

their stories' end so that the reader would remain constantly aware that Darrell Standing was not going to escape capital punishment, and that it will take centuries for the Oligarchy to fall from power—that cold reason, in the end, would triumph over passion, at least initially. Capek structures “R.U.R.” in much the same way, with much the same aim; once the robots have decided to take over, there are very few realistic options that remain for humanity.

As the action in “R.U.R.” intensifies, and as the behavior of the characters grows ever more illogical, Capek’s tale recalls London’s “The Rejuvenation of Major Rathbone,” another story of man’s meddling in scientific affairs that results in something unnatural and prepared to upset the balance: in this case, rather than a robot, it is one of the main characters’ uncle, transformed by a mysterious elixir from a frail old man to a hearty, destructive force with aspirations to involve himself in war and politics. Both “R.U.R.” and “The Rejuvenation of Major Rathbone” chronicle an escalating comedy of errors, as the main characters flail around in a panic, hatching various ineffectual schemes in their attempt to usurp the inevitable. Faced with the end of civilization as they know it, the two major characters in “R.U.R.” inexplicably opt to marry, as if feigning domesticity might prove a sufficient distraction. Meanwhile, in London’s story, the narrator and his ally Dover rejuvenate one of Major Rathbone’s past loves, with the hope that she might lure him away from his destructive path. The difference between these two narratives, of course, is that London’s is meant to be comic, despite the fact that it remains poised right on the precipice of outright terror; “The Rejuvenation of Major Rathbone” concludes with a tongue-in-cheek stroll into the sunset, disaster having been deftly averted. “R.U.R.” offers no such release. Although the play does contain moments of dark comedy, it concludes with a powerfully grim, apocalyptic image: the final surviving character murmurs a prayer and then repeatedly chants “will not perish!” as the curtain falls (Capek n.p.). The

thematic impression that “R.U.R.” leaves is one that echoes that of the vast majority of Jack London’s speculative fiction, from “The Rejuvenation of Major Rathbone” through “Planchette” to “The Shadow and the Flash.” Reason triumphs every time. Science triumphs every time. The natural world triumphs every time. Humans who do not realize this, or who refuse to accept it, are destined to a fate similar to that of Bassett in the final moments of “The Red One:” aware of Truth, the Unknown, and the “marvel of the rending of walls before the imaginable” only at “the onrush of the dark,” and not a moment before (“The Red One” 276).

Rare is the work of speculative fiction by Jack London that offers a happy denouement. Rarer, still, is the work of speculative fiction by Jack London whose bleak or downbeat conclusion is not the result of human error—whether that error is hubris, pride, betrayal, or some other misjudgment. A great deal of the speculative fiction that saw publication in the early 1900’s was little more than escapist fare involving interplanetary travel or alien attacks. Jack London’s speculative fiction was, at its core, about recognizable, flawed people, struggling against the strictures of the Gilded Age and the dawning century. London’s stories brought across the notion that speculative fiction could be cautionary, educational, and relatable. Genre fans of the era could read a serialized novel like *The Sky Pirate* and enjoy the romance, suspense, and derring-do. They could also read a tale like *The Star Rover* and wonder about the mettle of Darrell Standing, ponder what their own behavior might be like in the same circumstances, and debate whether or not the current prison system could bear any of the blame for Standing’s plight. In his 1976 science fiction collection *The Illustrated Man*, Ray Bradbury included a short story entitled “The Highway.” In this story, an unspectacular man named Hernando is at work plowing his fields when a convoy of thousands of cars abruptly roars past his property. When he manages to ask the driver of one car about the commotion, the driver answers “It’s come, the

atom war, the end of the world!” before zooming away and disappearing into the horizon. Hernando watches all the cars depart, thinks for a moment, then resumes plowing. “What do they mean, ‘the world?’” he muses as the story ends (Bradbury 61). Had a version of this story appeared in the late 1800’s, it is highly likely that it would have focused predominantly on the carnage: the war, the atom bomb, the aftermath. Thanks to Jack London’s contributions to the speculative fiction genre, Bradbury was able to focus the story on Hernando—and on what they mean by ‘the world.’

Robots. *Homo superior*. Futuristic dystopias. Much of what passes for classic modern science fiction today can be traced to the speculative fiction of Jack London. His speculative output may have been relatively small—roughly twenty novels or short stories over the span of nineteen years—but it was formative, and it serves as a vital turning point inside the genre. In Jack London’s speculative fiction, it is possible to see the influence of writers as diverse as Kipling, Conrad, Edward Bellamy, and Ambrose Bierce. It is possible to discern the national mindset in the midst of the Gilded Age. His speculative fiction allows for conversations about spiritualism, scientific fads, atavism, and rationality, as well as the treatment of racist and imperialist attitudes in the early twentieth century. London’s work can be viewed and enriched through the ecocritical lens of critical theory, and it can point the way towards the speculative and science fiction landscapes that came after, not just in American literature, but worldwide.

In “‘Utility and Beauty Should Be One’: The Landscape of Jack London’s Ranch of Good Intentions” (1989), Adrian and Mary Praetzellis describe the early twentieth century as a time when “intellectuals looked back to the 19th century with regret and toward the future with despair. The frontier was ‘closed,’ free land was no more, and the pioneer . . . lost his individualism and became just another wage earner in the impersonal, developing capitalist

system” (Praetzellis 34). Frontier literature, like *White Fang*, *The Call of the Wild*, and London’s sundry other Klondike adventure yarns, understood this sorrow and yearning, and offered its readers the opportunity to escape, to achieve temporary respite in those vast, freeing lands that suddenly no longer seemed so easily accessible. The fabled, bygone frontier, as J. Wreford Watson put it in *The Role of Illusion in North American Geography* (1969), could suffice, “until the true environment destroys the illusion” (Watson 10). London’s speculative fiction, however, provided no such easy illusions. “With the frontier gone,” states Barbara Stefanie Giehmann in *Writing the Northland* (2011), “there seemed to be no longer a place for hopes and the realization of dreams, no ‘safety valve’ for the fast-growing nation, no unlimited possibilities left and henceforth no longer unlimited progress” (Giehmann 44). The best of Jack London’s speculative fiction recognized the malaise, the wariness, and above all, the pronounced nostalgia that accompanied America’s transition into a new, louder, more experimental, faster-paced century. What made it so valuable is that it looked, and reached, *beyond* this confusing and exciting time towards the even more exciting times that potentially lay further ahead. Rather than casting a rueful glance backward, or offering a simple escape from the present day, London’s speculative fiction pressed ever forward, forging a new, provocative, potentially endless frontier, filled with new ideas and new possibilities. At the dawn of his own literary career, Jack London responded to a particularly fervent naysayer by professing “I don’t care if the whole present, all I possess, were swept away from me—I will build a new present; if I am left naked and hungry to-morrow—before I give in I will go on naked and hungry; if I were a woman I would prostitute myself to all men but that I would succeed—in short, I will” (*Letters* 26). There can be no doubt that Jack London’s legacy extends as far as the literary frontier he helped to forge.

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Appendix A

The Essential Speculative Fiction of Jack London

In chronological order:

“A Thousand Deaths,” 1899

“The Rejuvenation of Major Rathbone,” 1899

“A Relic of the Pliocene,” 1901

“The Shadow and the Flash,” 1903

“Planchette,” 1906

Before Adam, 1907

“A Curious Fragment,” 1908

“Goliath,” 1908

The Iron Heel, 1908

“The Unparalleled Invasion,” 1910

“When the World Was Young,” 1910

“The Strength of the Strong,” 1911

“The Scarlet Plague,” 1912

The Star Rover, 1915

“The Eternity of Forms,” 1916

“The Red One,” 1918