

Weronika Łaszkiewicz

University of Białystok

## Jack London: a writing sailor, a sailing writer

**Abstract.** The following paper analyzes how the experience of sailing shaped Jack London's life and works. On the one hand, the paper recounts those events from the writer's biography which contributed to his emotional attachment to the sea and created a realistic background for his texts. On the other hand, it focuses on a selection of London's works—"Typhoon Off the Coast of Japan", "Chris Farrington: Able Seaman", *The Sea-Wolf*, and *Martin Eden*—in order to investigate how the experience of sea and sailing affects a character's morality/personality, and to examine how the chosen narratives reflect and preserve London's own memories of life on board.

**Keywords:** Jack London, sea, ocean, sailing.

The biography of Jack London's life is a model example of a "rags to riches" story. Thanks to his diligence, hard work, and unyielding passion for knowledge and literature, London became one of the most renowned writers of his time, popular both in the US and abroad. According to Harold Bloom, even today London "remains both a phenomenon of our imaginative literature and a permanent figure in the American mythology" (2011: 1). One of the reasons for the past and present appeal of London's works is the author's ability to capture the beauty of nature, which he discovered in the barren lands of the north, the impenetrable forests and the open waters. In London's fiction, landscapes and seascapes are far more than decorative backgrounds for the development of the plot. The vividness and realism with which London evokes the natural sceneries can truly mesmerize the reader. The following passage comes from "The White Silence" (originally published in 1899):

Nature has many tricks wherewith she convinces man of his finity, — the ceaseless flow of the tides, the fury of the storm, the shock of the earthquake, the long roll of heaven's artillery, — but the most tremendous, the most stupefying of all, is the passive phase of the White Silence. All movement ceases, the sky clears, the heavens are as brass; the slightest whisper seems sacrilege, and man becomes timid, affrighted at the sound of his own voice. Sole speck of life journeying across the ghostly wastes of a dead world, he trembles at his audacity, realizes that his is a maggot's life, nothing more. Strange thoughts arise unsummoned, and the mystery of all things strives for utterance. And the fear of death, of God, of the universe, comes over him, — the hope of the Resurrection and the Life, the yearning for immortality, the vain striving of the imprisoned essence, — it is then, if ever, man walks alone with God. (London, 1899: n.p.)<sup>1</sup>

Given the above fragment, Bloom is correct to say that it is the "worship of the wild [that] still marks London's difference from nearly everyone else and accounts for London's permanent appeal to readers throughout the world" (2011: 2).

London's works have already been studied countless times for their political manifestos, development of masculinity, and heart-wrenching descriptions of the natural environment—which, however, tend to concentrate on his Alaskan stories. If the sea and sailing are mentioned, it is usually in addition to the study of the heroes from *The Sea-Wolf* or

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<sup>1</sup> Jack London's works are available in the public domain, so in my paper (if not indicated otherwise) I quote the electronic editions of his and his wife's, Charmian London's, articles, short stories and novels available at *The World of Jack London* ([www.jacklondon.net](http://www.jacklondon.net)), managed by David A. Hartzell. The publication data given in the Works Cited section include information about the original medium and date of publication provided by the website.

in the context of the articles and short stories written during the author's oceanic cruise on the *Snark*. The aim of this paper is to adopt the sea/ocean as the main prism for analyzing Jack London's biography and works. By turning the sea into a prominent and active agent of his narratives, London was able to do several things: portray the threatening beauty of the open waters, develop the personalities of his heroes, experiment with his literary alter egos, and forever preserve his own memories of sailing. Rebecca Steffoff warns, however, that

one cannot simply take London's writing as an accurate record of his life. In order to make a point or tell a more powerful story, he often exaggerated things or added fictional elements to writing that was mostly autobiographical. We cannot always untangle the thread of "real life" and "storytelling" that London wove together so well. (2002: 10)

In other words, London's literary versions of himself and his adventures need to be analyzed with a sensible dose of skepticism, because London could have deliberately refashioned his persona in order to disseminate the image of himself—of an adventurous and powerful man—that he always carried in his mind.

Jack London's passion for sailing began in his early childhood. Together with his stepfather, John London, he often went fishing in the estuary lying between Oakland and Alameda (London, vol.1, 1921: 54).<sup>2</sup> After school and work, he would frequently visit the Oakland docks, because the sight of ships and sailors—just like his favorite books—allowed him to fantasize about the vastness and richness of the world (Stone, 1938: 32-45). Jack managed to buy his first boat before he was thirteen, and this purchase revealed the strength of his passion: a boy whose family had no money to waste decided to spend the fruit of his hard labor on a boat, because sailing offered him the first taste of unlimited freedom and a temporary escape from the dull reality filled with constant work.

Eventually, Jack found a way to combine his love for sailing and the necessity to support his family. Instead of working in the cannery, he bought a boat, the *Razzle-Dazzle*, and became a young oyster-pirate in San Francisco Bay. He recounts his elation about the new occupation in his autobiographical novel *John Barleycorn* (1913):

There it was, the smack and slap of the spirit of revolt, of adventure, of romance, of the things forbidden and done defiantly and grandly. [...] And at last my dream would be realised: I would sleep upon the water. And next morning I would wake upon the water; and thereafter all my days and nights would be on the water. (London, 1913: n.p.)

The job of an oyster-pirate introduced the teenage boy to the world of brutal men, alcohol and adventures; it allowed him not only to earn money, but also to gather experiences that would later create reliable backgrounds and realistic characters for his narratives. Jack resigned from being an oyster-pirate when he was caught by the fish patrol, which he subsequently joined; the adventures from that period of time were later immortalized in his collection of short stories entitled "Tales of the Fish Patrol" (1906).

In his later life, London was very proud of his skills as a small-boat sailor which he acquired in his teenage years. In one of his articles, "Small-Boat Sailing" (1912), he even wrote: "Barring captains and mates of big ships, the small-boat sailor is the real sailor" (London, 1912: n.p.).<sup>3</sup> In the article London enumerates various activities which a small-boat sailor must be able to perform on his own (and quickly), and which the deepwater sailors are not acquainted with. London also recounts his meeting with a runaway English sailor with

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<sup>2</sup> Charmian London's *The Book of Jack London* (1921) is frequently perceived as a rather sentimental and romanticized account of her late husband. This is evident in such lines as, "And, like Jack's, John's wide-set, gray-blue, dancing eyes and sweeping ways were not to be resisted by mortal woman" (18). Nevertheless, Charmian, the undaunted companion of Jack's journeys, best understood his passion for adventures and sailing.

<sup>3</sup> "Small-Boat Sailing" was first published in *Yachting Monthly*, August 1912. The article is now available at *The World of Jack London*.

whom he sailed on his own boat. When the man took command over the small vessel, young Jack was prepared to see a true sailor at work. But the man hardly knew what to do:

My mouth remained open, for I learned what a real sailor was in a small boat. He couldn't trim the sheet to save himself, he nearly capsized several times in squalls, and, once again, by blunderingly jibing over; [...] And yet he was a really truly sailor fresh from the vasty deep. (London, 1912: n.p.)

In terms of small-boat sailing, the boy proved to be a more experienced sailor than his grown-up companion. London claimed that the skills he acquired during his teenage voyages prepared him for becoming a deepwater sailor, which, however, he generally considered a less demanding occupation if compared to small-boat cruises.

London became a deepwater sailor—a decision that could have been predicted after he had bought his first boat (Stone, 1938: 46)—at the age of seventeen, when he joined the crew of the *Sophia Sutherland*, a seal-hunting, three-top-mast schooner going on a seven-months' cruise across the Pacific. Thus, he could finally explore the lands beyond the landscapes of his childhood. But he also had to face the ferocity of the ocean and brave the challenges of older men, who at first did not accept him as an “able-bodied” sailor and their equal. During the cruise Jack managed to prove both his worth and skill. Yet despite his success, after his return from the voyage he did not sign up for another one. One of the reasons for the decision was his constant search for novelty: though he was fond of his achievements as an able-bodied sailor, he wanted to gather other experiences, available in other places and with other people. There was also a more practical reason behind his decision: he had to find a more stable job to support his family. Yet given London's personality, thirst for adventures and craving for knowledge, it would be impossible for him to secure one menial job for several years, to be a factory worker whose life would be immersed in routine and monotony. Fortunately, the short story he submitted for a local contest won him first prize and marked the beginning of his literary career. “The Typhoon Off the Coast of Japan” (1893), written in first-person narration, is an account of London's own adventure on the *Sophia Sutherland*. The tale is a realistic description of sailors' life, a detailed account of the art of sailing, and an expression of Jack's delight with the beauty of the ocean, which the readers are invited to share with him:

The waves were holding high carnival, performing the strangest antics, as with wild glee they danced along in fierce pursuit [...]. In the sun's path they wandered, where every ripple, great or small, every little spit or spray looked like molten silver, where the water lost its dark green color and became a dazzling, silvery flood, only to vanish and become a wild waste of sullen turbulence, each dark foreboding sea rising and breaking, then rolling on again. (London, 1922: n.p.)

But Jack, his heroes and readers learn that this beauty can become lethally dangerous in a matter of hours; the crew is forced to struggle for survival in the midst of a typhoon. The success of “The Typhoon...” motivated London to pursue the career of a writer; the sea and sailing became recurring motifs of his fiction.

London returns to the image of a battle between the sailors and a storm in another short story, “Chris Farrington: Able Seaman” (1901). In contrast to the previous tale, this one is devoted entirely to the efforts of one man—young Chris Farrington—who is one of London's numerous literary alter egos. The whole story is London's thinly concealed admiration of his own early achievements in sailing. In fact, London considered his standing at the schooner's wheel during the storm “the proudest achievement of [his] life” and his “moment of highest living” (1911, ch.1: n.p.).

Like young Jack on the *Sophia Sutherland*, Chris Farrington has to face adult sailors and prove that he is their equal, an able seaman, which he does by saving the schooner (also called the *Sophia Sutherland* and also hunting for seals) from a storm, when only two other men are present on board. While the ocean is raging with storm, the bruised and battered

Chris does everything he can to keep the ship afloat. The narrator emphasizes the magnitude of the challenge and complements it with dramatic descriptions of the ocean's rage:

The least fraction of carelessness and the heave of the sea under the quarter was liable to thrust her into the trough. So, a boy of one hundred and forty pounds, he clung to his herculean task of guiding the two hundred straining tons of fabric amid the chaos of the great storm forces. [...]

So small and insignificant the schooner seemed on the long Pacific roll! Rushing up a maddening mountain, she would poise like a cockle-shell on the giddy summit, breathless and rolling, leap outward and down into the yawning chasm beneath, and bury herself in the smother of foam at the bottom. Then the recovery, another mountain, another sickening upward rush, another poise, and the downward crash. (London, 1922: n.p.)

The seventeen-year-old Chris takes command of the ship, does not give in to exhaustion, and—after the storm is over—immediately returns to search for the abandoned hunters. Though he is burdened with great responsibility, he manages to cope with everything and earns the respect of other sailors. Through Chris and his success (which nevertheless seems a bit exaggerated), London commemorates his own teenage adventure and acceptance into the world of adult men.

A similar pattern also appears in his other early stories, thus providing evidence of how strongly London felt about his first sailing voyages. In “The Lost Poacher” (1901), the crew of the *Mary Thomas* is captured by a Russian patrol, accused of poaching, and subsequently threatened with the possibility of being sent to Siberia. Bub, the young cabin-boy, is taken by the Russians, questioned, and later left unattended on their ship. At night, Bub courageously cuts off the ropes linking the *Mary Thomas* to the Russian ship, and the schooner is quickly retaken by its crew. Bub is left with the Russians who, fortunately, recognize his courage and loyalty, so they set him free. The boy is later reunited with the *Mary Thomas* and praised by his comrades. “In Yeddo Bay” (1903) features a sixteen-year-old Alf Davis, a sailor on the *Annie Mine*, who has to return to his schooner in the Yokohama harbor, but has no money to pay the boat fare. When none of the local people is willing to help him, Alf decides to swim to the schooner. This act of independence and courage earns him the respect of the local men and the entire crew. These and other short stories are a portrayal of youthful pride, courage, and a desire for recognition, which were so characteristic of young London.

As if in contrast, one of London's later short stories, “The Sea Farmer”<sup>4</sup> (1914), describes his complete opposite—Captain MacElrath, for whom sailing is just a means of earning a living:

Captain MacElrath did not like the sea, and had never liked it. He wrung his livelihood from it, and that was all the sea was, the place where he worked, as the mill, the shop, and the counting-house were the places where other men worked. Romance never sang to him her siren song, and Adventure had never shouted in his sluggish blood. He lacked imagination. The wonders of the deep were without significance to him. Tornadoes, hurricanes, waterspouts, and tidal waves were so many obstacles to the way of a ship on the sea and of a master on the bridge—they were that to him, and nothing more. (London, 1914: n.p.)

Though the passage provides no explicit comparison between MacElrath and London himself, an implicit comparison is hard to miss: for a man such as London, sailing was always the embodiment of adventure and fuel for the imagination, not simply a means of earning his living. He was deeply convinced that

A sailor is born, not made. And by “sailor” is meant, not the average efficient and hopeless creature who is found to-day in the forecabin of deepwater ships, but the man who will take a fabric

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<sup>4</sup> “The Sea Farmer” was part of the collection entitled *The Strength of the Strong* published by Macmillan in 1914. The collection is available at *The World of Jack London*.

compounded of wood and iron and rope and canvas and compel it to obey his will on the surface of the sea. [...]

And if a man is a born sailor, and has gone to the school of the sea, never in all his life can he get away from the sea again. The salt of it is in his bones as well as his nostrils, and the sea will call to him until he dies. (London, 1912: n.p.)

Yet London's description of the Captain, who perceives everything as obstacles "and nothing more", does not seem scornful. Rather than chide MacElarth, London seems sad that the Captain, like so many people bound to life on land, fails to recognize and to indulge in the beauty of marine life—two mistakes which London did not make, since his passion for sea voyages continued to re-emerge in different periods of his life.

Moreover, the experience of being on the open waters seemed to have a soothing effect on London's mind. Charmian London, his second wife, wrote: "Whenever Jack London set foot upon deck-planking, he left behind more than the solid earth. Whatsoever load of soul-sickness or care he had borne to the water's edge fell from him, or, more fitly, shrank to its true scant measure under the springing arch of life" (vol.1, 1921: 111). It was so because

The wide sea and dome of sky, with all their moods of color and motion, pervaded him with a never-palling joyance of eye and spirit. In the night watches, swinging majestically under the wintry steel-blue stars, or fighting through big seas beneath low scudding moonlit cloud-masses, with only the pale-glimmering binnacle for company, he knew again those lofty, cool levels of contemplation wherein his vision was extended into ever-receding distances of thought. (London, vol.1, 1921: 119-120)

Clarice Stasz also argues that London "was most at peace on the water, and would escape to boats all his life" (Stasz, 2001: 27); it was a yacht that became London's temporary escape from marital problems when he was divorcing his first wife, Bess. In addition, the freedom offered by sailing seemed to stimulate London's literary skills. In a letter to his friend Cloudesley Johns (1899) London wrote: "Many who know me, ask why I, with my knowledge of the sea, do not write some sea fiction. But you see I have been away from it so long that I have lost touch. I must first get back and saturate myself with its atmosphere" (qtd. in London, vol.1, 1921: 309). Thus, it was his escape to the boat that allowed him to finish *The Sea-Wolf* (1904) in spite of personal dilemmas. *The Sea-Wolf*, written on the *Spray* (bought from the sale of *The Call of the Wild* in 1903), where London could feel the breeze on his face and the waves beneath his feet, is the epitome of his relationship with sailing and perhaps his personal tribute to Herman Melville, whose works he devoured as a child.

In *The Sea-Wolf*, London uses Humphrey van Weyden's voyage on the seal-hunting schooner, the *Ghost*, as a background for developing several themes: his interest in certain philosophical doctrines, delight in the open waters, observation about the brutal world of seamen, and a reflection on his troublesome love life. As a result, the sea and the ship become witness to the sailors' lives of unending toil, Wolf Larsen's tyranny, and Hump's struggle to survive and become a man. The *Ghost* is a self-sustaining reality, separated from the rest of the world by the vastness of the sea, and dominated by violence in its most primitive form. Under such circumstances, the so-far pampered Hump finally becomes an independent and self-reliant man. Hump shares the process of reaching maturity with Maud Brewster, the woman rescued by Larsen. In the course of the journey, Maud (who seems to be a reflection of London's second wife, Charmian) proves that apart from being an object of Hump's love interest, she can also be his companion and support in the fight for survival. The stark conditions of the sea voyage are an active agent in the process of shaping their personalities and in allowing them to discover their skills. When Maud and Hump return home and reclaim their place in society, their perception of class and gender is greatly affected by their experience of the sea. Sam S. Baskett argues in "Sea Change in *The Sea-Wolf*" that there is even a "change toward androgyny" (in Bloom, 2011: 29), because the evolution of Hump's

and Maud's perception of masculinity and femininity allows them to complement each other's endeavors in several new ways.

The portrayals of other characters reveal more ways in which people can be shaped by their experience of the sea and the conditions of an oceanic voyage. London's interest in the philosophies of Darwin, Spencer and Nietzsche, as well as his disillusionment with life, contributed to the creation of Wolf Larsen, the ship's captain, whose actions and conversations are permeated by cynical materialism, and for whom life is nothing more than "yeast". Larsen is the most brutal man on the *Ghost* and has no regard for morality whatsoever. Such behavior, paired with his capricious nature, indifference to human suffering, and inhuman strength elevate Larsen beyond and above humanity, and turn him into a symbolic incarnation of the sea, which is equally ferocious, capricious and indifferent to human struggle. This connection between Larsen and the sea is strengthened by the look in his eyes, which Hump in turn describes as resembling the "azure of the deep sea" or "bleak, and cold, and grey as the sea itself" (London, 1904, ch.3: n.p.), and by the fact that Larsen's entire life has been devoted to sailing. Thus, it is only natural that when Larsen dies, he is given the traditional sea burial, which reunites his spirit with the primal element that molded it. That the sea and sailing are able to shape people and their behavior is also visible in Hump's description of other seamen: in their indifference to violence and suffering, in their rough manners, and even in their laughter, which is as "harsh and frank as the sea itself; that arose out of coarse feelings and blunted sensibilities, from natures that knew neither courtesy nor gentleness" (London, 1904, ch.3: n.p.).

London was not, however, satisfied by only *writing* about oceanic adventures in his adult life. "At sea, by testing himself to the limit of his physical endurance, he could reinvent himself as a legendary traveler, a man who could face any challenge and still conquer" (Kershaw, 1997: 177). London had one particular dream connected with sailing, which he managed to partially fulfill, encouraged by Charmian. He planned a cruise around the globe: to Hawaii, New Zealand, Australia and India, through the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic, with San Francisco as the final destination point—a journey whose "itinerary seems ambitious even today" (Riedl and Tietze in Berkove, 2012: 294). To make the enterprise even more exciting, London decided to build his own boat, the *Snark*, so he spent weeks learning about the art of building ships. He calculated that he would need about seven thousand dollars to have his dream boat, but he was ready to spend every cent he had. Which he actually did, because from the very beginning the enterprise seemed doomed to fail. Work was constantly interrupted and delayed by several minor and major problems that required more and more money, which London managed to earn or borrow, only to learn that his employees and sub-contractors were cheating him in every possible way. He postponed the date of departure several times—something "inconceivable and monstrous" (London, 1911, ch.2: n.p.)<sup>5</sup>—and eventually became the laughing stock of the country. London was in turn angry, frustrated and depressed, but he never admitted defeat, as if the ship had become "an all-consuming obsession" (Kershaw 1997: 173). Many people thought that the ship would either never be completed or would sink during the first days of the cruise.

At the same time, however, other people wrote to London pleading for a chance to participate in the cruise. People from all walks of life were ready to work for free just to escape from the monotony or problems of everyday existence. London had to decline most offers. Later, in *The Cruise of the Snark* (1911), he wrote:

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<sup>5</sup> The quote comes from *The Cruise of the Snark*, published by Macmillan in 1911. The entire book is available at *The World of Jack London*.

Some day, when I have made a lot of money, I'm going to build a big ship, with room in it for a thousand volunteers. They will have to do all the work of navigating that boat around the world, or they'll stay at home. I believe that they'll work the boat around the world, for I know that Adventure is not dead. I know Adventure is not dead because I have had a long and intimate correspondence with Adventure. (ch.3: n.p.)

The *Snark* eventually cost London about thirty thousand dollars and became the epitome of his stubbornness, pride, and naivety (Stone, 1938: 223-236). In theory, the boat's design allowed for both sea cruises and inland trips, e.g. up the Thames to London, or up the Seine to Paris, since the masts could be lowered and the boat could be then powered by an engine. In practice, the original itinerary was never completed.

When the journey finally began (in April 1907), London almost immediately had to struggle with several problems in the ship's construction and equipment. It was amongst that chaos and misery that he started to write *Martin Eden* (published in 1909), a heavily autobiographical novel which is permeated by the specters of melancholy, frustration and ultimate failure. Martin Eden, an uneducated sailor from a working-class background, struggles to become a writer and to win the love of Ruth Morse from a bourgeois family. Before Martin achieves literary recognition, he is rejected by Ruth, so eventually even his successful career cannot diminish his disillusionment with love and society. When life becomes too painful, Martin jumps off the *Mariposa* and commits a suicide by drowning himself in the sea.

This scene of drowning is an echo of London's own experience (Stone, 1938: 43). One night, when he was still an oyster-pirate, London fell into the water, and because he was drunk and in a melancholic mood, he started to contemplate a suicidal death by drowning, which seemed romantic and tragic enough for his tastes. When he finally came to his senses, he drifted for hours and was eventually rescued by a fisherman. London recollected this memory in *John Barleycorn* (1913), an autobiographical novel which deals mostly with the problem of excessive drinking (Stasz, 2001: 29-30). The novel also provides an account of London's first contact with and enthusiasm for marine life:

It was the first sea-interior I had ever seen. The clothing on the wall smelled musty. But what of that? Was it not the sea-gear of men? [...] And everywhere was in evidence the economy of space--the narrow bunks, the swinging tables, the incredible lockers. There were the tell-tale compass, the sea-lamps in their gimbals, the blue-backed charts carelessly rolled and tucked away, the signal-flags in alphabetical order, and a mariner's dividers jammed into the woodwork to hold a calendar. At last I was living. (London, 1913, ch.6: n.p.)

Jonathan Auerbach points out (1996: 185) that the motif of death by drowning frequently appears in London's early works, e.g. in "Frisco Kid's Story" (1895), *A Daughter of the Snows* (1902), and *The Call of the Wild* (1903). Some of the heroes, e.g. the protagonist from "A Thousand Deaths" (1899) and Van Weyden from *The Sea-Wolf*, are saved from drowning, but some, like the tragic protagonist of *Martin Eden*, are not. Auerbach argues that

In all these examples, drowning signifies social death, so that being saved from such a fate represents a reprieve from the abyss of failure [...] we can begin to grasp the powerful hold this scene had on London's imagination: what it meant in terms of his fear that he might never amount to anything, might never make a name for himself. (Auerbach, 1996: 185)

But even "making a name for himself" is ultimately not enough to overpower Martin Eden's death wish, since he commits suicide at the top of his career. He chooses drowning because for him—for a sailor—that is the only acceptable kind of death; a death through which he, like Wolf Larsen, is reunited with the primal element that had shaped his life. It is also symbolic that he chooses to leave the ship through a porthole, instead of jumping straight from the deck. Charles Watson suggests: "The porthole is the orifice of the womb, the door of the world, but Martin is passing through it backwards [feet first], returning to the dark womb

of the maternal sea” (1983: 160)—a sailor returning to the embrace of his mother. The suicide is foreshadowed by Martin’s quotation of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem *Christus: A Mystery* (1872):

The sea is still and deep;  
All things within its bosom sleep;  
A single step and all is o’er,  
A plunge, a bubble, and no more. (in London, 1909, ch.30: n.p.)

Moreover, the name of Martin Eden’s ship—the *Mariposa*—is also symbolic. Firstly, it was the name of the ship on which London sailed back to San Francisco when his cruise on the *Snark* was temporarily interrupted by several financial issues he had to tend to at home (Stone, 1938: 245). London’s thoughts during the return journey were probably not the happiest ones if he immortalized the *Mariposa* as the ship bearing witness to Eden’s death. Another explanation is uncovered through the translation of the ship’s name. *Mariposa* is the Spanish word for a butterfly, and “the butterfly has been associated with the spirits of the dead and with the passage from death to life and vice versa” (DeGuzmán and López in Hodson and Campbell Reesman, 2002: 118).

Despite his alter ego’s tragic death, London was still hungry for life and Adventure, so he returned to the *Snark* in spite of the several voices which insisted that he had already proved his point and would do better staying in San Francisco. Charmian’s support proved invaluable since she, London’s “mate-woman” (Stasz in Berkove, 2012: 221),

was the best of shipmates. Unmistakably feminine and deeply in love with Jack, she yet was far from the stereotype of the delicately reserved and sheltered Edwardian woman. She thrilled at the thought of real adventure and eagerly took part in every aspect of the voyage, including putting herself in danger of bodily harm from perils of remote seas, exotic diseases, and threats from islanders widely reputed to be savages. (Riedl and Tietze in Berkove, 2012: 296)

Charmian also shared her husband’s passion for sailing and marine life, which is visible in her own descriptions of their cruise:

It is all a piece of wonder, the sea, to such as we: still magic of calms, where one’s boat lies with motionless grace upon a shadow-flecked expanse of mirror; or when one laughs in the pelt of warm sea-rain from a ragged gray sky of clouds; or peers for blue-black squalls darkling upon the silver moonlit waves; or lifts prideful, fond eyes to the small ship’s goodly spars standing fast in a white gale; or gazes in marvel at those same spars lighted to flame by the red-gilt morning sunrays from over some green and purple savage isle feared of God and man; or braces to the Pacific rollers bowling upon the surface of the eternal unagitated depths; or scans the configuration of coasts from inadequate charts; or steers, tense, breathless, through the gateways of but half-known reefs [. . .] (vol. 2, 1921: 168)

Supported by his enthusiastic wife, London remained impervious to negative opinions and continued the cruise, sometimes even claiming that the months spent on the *Snark* were the happiest in his life (Stone, 1938: 253-254). As usual, adventures gave impetus to his writing, and apart from creating *Martin Eden*, London produced several journalistic articles and short stories which described the people and cultures he encountered on the way.

The journey lasted only about two years. It came to an abrupt end in September 1908, in Sydney, where due to health problems London had to forsake his plans. Despite his emotional attachment to the boat, he sold the ruined ship and in June 1909 returned to San Francisco (people would occasionally report to the Londons that they had seen the *Snark*, but they eventually lost track of her whereabouts). Summing up the entire enterprise, on the one hand, London survived the mockery and criticism in order to have his dream adventure, which offered him invaluable experiences that he could transform into literature. On the other hand, the journey was fraught with several difficulties, and when London finally returned to San Francisco he was ill, exhausted and in debt. He also had to deal with the thought that his

dreams of a grand oceanic voyage were not fulfilled. He did organize, together with Charmian, many shorter cruises, e.g. on the inland yacht, the *Roamer*, which he bought in 1910. They also went on a longer journey and sailed around Cape Horn, from Baltimore to Seattle. Nevertheless, London did not undertake, or given his premature death, did not have time to undertake, another cruise around the world.

Jack London was a man of letters and, at the same time, a man of the sea, who read and wrote extensively, both on land and on board. Charmian London confirmed that

it was upon the liquid two-thirds of earth's surface that I saw him the most blissfully content. Dawn or twilight, he loved the way of a boat upon the sea. [...] "Seamen have at all times been a people apart," curiously so, from the rest of their kind; and the sailor Jack London was a man apart from the rest of himself. Imagination, nerves, work, pleasure, all ran in smoother grooves when his feet stood between the moving surface and the blowing sky, his own intelligence the equalizing force amidst unstable elements. Seldom in waking hours without books or spoken argument exerting upon his wheeling brain, yet at the helm of his boat, braced for day-long hours, he would stand rapt in healthful ecstasy of sheer being, lord of life and the harnessed powers of nature, unheedful of physical strain, his own hand directing fate. (vol.1, 1921: 64-65)

London successfully established the ocean and sailing as prominent elements of his narratives, and preserved his own experiences of sailing through the adventures of his literary alter egos. Of course, this does not mean that his other works, those not related to sailing, e.g. *Before Adam* (1907), *The Iron Heel* (1908), or *The Star Rover* (1915), are of lesser importance. Nevertheless, writing and sailing were two activities which equally shaped his private life and fiction. In the end, London himself wrote, in "Small-Boat Sailing": "once a sailor, always a sailor. The savour of the salt never stales. The sailor never grows so old that he does not care to go back for one more wrestling bout with wind and wave. I know it of myself" (London, 1912: n.p.).

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<sup>6</sup> Charmian London's and Jack London's works are available at *The World of Jack London*. <http://jacklondon.net>, date of retrieval 20 March 2015. The following publication data are those provided by the website.

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