Jack London: The Racist Who Wrote Anti-Racist Short-Stories

(An essay)

Jack London was what we would call today a best-selling author with mass-appeal. By 1913, he was the highest paid author in the world.[[1]](#footnote-1) 90 years after his death, publishing houses around the globe still print the most popular 24 books of his legacy.[[2]](#footnote-2) Being an author of such scope, it is important what sort of massage his writings convey to the reader. It is even more so on the subject of race given the multicultural demographics of his audience today in contrast to the typical reader of his time. It can be speculated that especially before his works were translated into other languages, people who could afford to buy new books and read him in magazines and journals were mostly white men and some privileged women around them. It would have required a lot of farsightedness of London to imagine the effect of his legacy on the diverse population of his country nowadays, let alone the globalized world. [[3]](#footnote-3)

It is the effect of his legacy in popular culture today that provoked my interest in the research topic. However, my essay does not provide an exhaustive account of the chronological development of the author's thoughts on the subject of race, segregation, and inequality like the extensive research done by Jeanne Campbell Reesman in her book *Jack London’s racial lives: a critical biography* (2013) does. Instead, I have focused on only two short stories, namely: *The White Man’s Way* (1905) and *The Chinago*, (1908). As the pseudo-academic article by Ben Goldstein implies, Jack London’s fiction and non-fiction writings regarding race issues may be controversial and we should not “ascribe what a character says or does in a story or novel as the beliefs or desired actions of the author. On the other hand, we also must consider that the character is serving as the author’s voice.” [[4]](#footnote-4) I will support that the two short stories can be characterized as a mix of sociological and psychological impressions on human nature common across the different races. Even though they contradict with some of the author’s non-fiction writings of earlier periods, their extremely persuasive power and realism of narration deliver a message of compassion that speaks for a humanistic, sympathetic, and egalitarian approach to the race phenomenon.

*The White Man’s Way* is about an old Native American couple who had to explain to a white man sheltered in their home for the night why they were left without food in winter. So they started telling the story of how they lost both their sons because they could not understand how white people think. Everything had started when a neighbor “Indian” killed a drunken white person in combat of self-defense. White soldiers came to arrest him and took him from the North all the way down to court in California by large ship where he was treated with free food and shelter. Later he was judged innocent and returned to his home village. But this even is utterly incomprehensible for the “Indians” of his fellow tribe. According to their culturally and socially accepted code of conduct, any type of incident resulting in a loss is to be compensated by the inhabitants of the place of the incident to the people of the innocent victim. To the “Indian” tribe standards of justice, the members of the white community were expected to plead for material compensation like blankets, wood, fish and other goods and commodities. What white men did instead, was a plain stupidity in the eyes of the “Indians”: they showed the guilty “Indian” “a ship of steel,” ”a land with no winter” at the “end of the world” and gave him rich food so that he could become fat. All things his tribe envied for. His fellow men made him a leader after his return, and he was all too happy to talk about the wide world he had seen on the fortunate event of killing a white person. So, the son of the Indian couple wanted to see all of these miraculous things, but could not find a way out of his predestined situation. Then he got the “illness of the head” and could not hunt, eat or sleep but think about the adventures out of his reach. One day his worried father came home with the “cure”. He had spotted earlier that day a weak wired white person, who is so strange to collect only the shells of the eggs, to like bones, especially the old ones, and to gather insects but without eating them. That person was a biologist, but his profession is something unimaginable to the “Indians” who thought him simply crazy or stupid. Then father and son came up with the plan of bringing the white madman to a place of some interest of his, killing him there, and then the soldiers would come and take the son "on holiday". Unfortunately, they hanged the boy. The other son died in similar misunderstandings.

Know, O White Man, [An old Indian woman speaks to a white guest at the presence of her husband in their house.] that it is because of thy kind, because of all white man, that my man and I have no meat in our old age and sit without tobacco in the cold” [The husband, an old Indian starts speaking] Wrong has been done us, it be true; but the white man did not mean the wrong. […] the white man’s not a lying people. The white man speaks true. Always does the white man speak true. […] but the white man speaks true in different ways. To-day he speaks true one way, to-morrow he speaks true another way, and there is no understanding him nor his way.[…] Always does the Indian do the one thing in the one way. Always does the moose come down from the high mountains when the winter is here. Always does the salmon come in the spring when the ice has gone out of the river. Always does everything do all things in the same way, and the Indian knows and understands. But the white man does not do all things in the same way, and the Indian does not know nor understand.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The complex interdependencies of white men’s civilization in comparison with the limited in space and modes of conduct “Indian” lifestyle are generating a gap of incomprehension that is filled with the quasi-explanation of race and ethnicity. The fast and easy answer that the differences are produced by the skin color is childishly naïve in the context of the narration.

In the second short story, London presents us the thoughts of a chinago[[6]](#footnote-6) about an ongoing trial on a murder case. The boy was innocent and believed he would go back to his work any minute, but then he is the one to be publicly executed. One chinago killed another. The main protagonist is innocent and marvels at the stupidity of German, French, and English people who are not using torture to find out who was the real killer, like authority would do in China. In all instances, though, Ah Cho feels safe and happy fantasizing about his bright future the moment he gets back rich to his home country. It is so tedious that these white people waste him one week of wages for this trail, he thinks. But there starts creeping the mistrust stemming out of incomprehension: “There was no understanding these white devils…There was no telling what went on at the back of their minds […] They grew angry without apparent cause, and their anger was always dangerous. They were like wild beasts at such times.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The motives of the whites were initially to find who the murderer is and punish him. Unfortunately, all of the “chinagos” kept silent. Even when just before execution the supervisor realized that this is not the right guy, they killed him anyway for the whole crowd had already gathered, they were wasting working hours, and it would be too much of a hustle to start it all over again. To the owner of the plantation, all the lives of the workers were equally deprived of value. There made no difference if it would be this one or the other. The story is classified by King Hendricks as “the greatest story of London’s career” [[8]](#footnote-8) because of its atmosphere and development of irony. It is indeed ironic that given the way the trial was conducted “there were the French, eager and willing to impose upon the Chinagos the virtues and excellence of French low.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Acording to Jeanne Reesman writes that “In stories such as ‘Mauki’, ‘The Chinago’, and ‘The house of pride’ he unambiguously demonstrates the moral bankruptcy of white dominance while giving voice to competing cultural subjectivities.”[[10]](#footnote-10) In both short stories summarised above, no race or ethnicity is shown to be better but only different. The clash of these differences produces disastrous consequences when the communication infrastructure for exchange of values, morals, and ideas is non-existing. Perhaps, it is not occasional that the first and last sentences are about language and knowledge: “Ah Cho did not understand French.”[[11]](#footnote-11) And “That much he knew before he ceased to know.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Reesman further writes that:

The story presents understanding as limited by cultural and linguistic ignorance. Knowledge in this tale is either wrong – despite the central motif of the murder as a way to find out truth – misinterpreted, or deliberately covered up.[[13]](#footnote-13) [And] mutual failure to understand each other […] is the fatal problem: linguistic failure to adapt to an environment that includes others, to understand their ethics and values through language. Unlike much adventure writing of his day, in London’s works a visit to an exotic locale focuses not upon “native” practices as exotic but upon their normalcy, if upset by the oppression of their “civilizers” – a reversal of popular stereotypes about indigenous peoples.[[14]](#footnote-14)

This remark on the importance of language and knowledge is more in tune with the current debates in social sciences[[15]](#footnote-15) than the Social Darwinism and other racist concepts popular during London’s lifetime when the intellectual climate was factored by the works of Freud, Marx, Jung, Pavlov, and Nietzsche among many “titans of thought”. Dale Ross argues that after gaining popularity over the Atlantic, their ideas naturally found reflection in the works of novelists. It is not possible to label these influences with one word for they resemble an eclectic mixture of behaviorism, determinism, neo-romanticism and a dose of many others.[[16]](#footnote-16) Ross concludes that “when London is condemned for espousing conflicting […] ideas, his judges are […] charging him with no greater error than being the representative of the world in which he lived.”[[17]](#footnote-17) From contemporary perspective the distinction between popular and academic is done almost automatically, but during the 20th century many humanitarian academics were quite often “pop-stars” as well. According to biographer and scholar Clarice Stasz, interviewed by Ben Goldstein, “Eugenics and Social Darwinism were the sciences of the day and were taught at Berkley while London was present for his one semester of college [in 1896]. Other schools [such] as Harvard and Yale also taught these concepts. [[18]](#footnote-18)

The (educational) environment in the USA was such that Jack London got familiarized with these two racist theories. Thus, London was just a man of his day, or rather a 21-year-old student, to be exact. We are provided with the “reading list” London made for himself, which includes also H. Spencer, T. H. Huxley, J. Fiske, E. Haeckel, J. Hewitt’s *The Ruling Races of Prehistoric Times* (1894), and M. Townsend’s *Asia and Europe* (1901).[[19]](#footnote-19) Jeanne Campbell Reesman claims that “In light of his reading, it is surprising that he could become a writer who portrayed ‘alien’ races sensitively at all.”[[20]](#footnote-20) However, thoughts and ideas may contradict feelings and intuition. While it appears that he took use of the first set in his non-fiction writing, his fiction, especially the short stories are penetrated mostly by feelings of warmhearted love, compassion, and devotion that are above everything and all humane and universally shared across different races. It may even appear schizophrenic that London, as Lawrence I. Berkove notices, “continues his satire of social Darwinism in other stories of both the Arctic and the South Seas, e.g. ‘The Inevitable White Man’ (1908), where white men prove their ‘fitness’ not by progressive ideas of civilization and morality but by superior vice, ruthlessness, and killing power.”[[21]](#footnote-21) What is more,

Despite the contradictions his work displays about race, London himself was straightforwardly racialized by his celebrity-hood into an Anglo-Saxon he-man in newspapers, magazines, and films. This symbol of the white male “zone-conqueror” […] was at odds with the actual heroes of his stories, very few of whom would fit this stereotype. [And] despite his ideas on evolution he tends to focus not upon the species or the group but on exceptional individuals of any “race” and their responses to the environment.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Notoriously, the natural environment did play a big part in London’s fiction. But it was the economic environment that he referred to most often in his non-fiction writings of a socialist. Goldstein quotes an article by London on the “Japanese Question” in the *Australian Star* from 1909, the year after the writing of the later short story discussed above: “Here’s the race-adventure – the first clashing of the Asiatic dream with ours. It is true, it is only an economic clash, but economic clashes *always* precede clashes at arms.” [[23]](#footnote-23) Therefore, London sees the economic motives to be the driving force behind civilization clashes and not any ideological ones. Ideology then may instead result from the very clash that happened beforehand. However, we must not forget that this is a quote in a newspaper article as London exercised the journalistic profession too. As such, we are not granted his very authentic believes on the matter, if they were clear to him at all.[[24]](#footnote-24) Goldstein correctly remarks that,

The racism in these writings is sometimes blunt, sometimes circumspect, and sometimes a preamble to confronting race prejudice in general. London is all over the map. The question arises, is this journalism taking a look at all sides or is it an attempt to reduce race prejudice by seeming to go along with the reader’s view and then seeing how far he can push them in the other direction. The writings at once seem racially provocative and then puncture the balloon of racism by looking at the other side.

In conclusion, it is the looking at the others’ side, putting ourselves into the others’ shoes, that takes place in the two fictional stories chosen for my paper, but not only there. Reesman points out that:

London was capable of uttering abhorrent crudities in support of white superiority, while a majority of his short stories are rich in imaginative insight in the lives of racial Others. He paired stories highlighting ambiguities about U.S. and European powers built empires around the Pacific.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Like it often happens to prolific writers and social activists, Jack London left a controversial legacy on the subject of race due to the time he was born, his quest for identity, and encounters with impressive “Others”. However, as the interpretation of the two stories contributes to his multifaceted and complicated image of a provocative writer, it also demonstrates that his fictional work is not deprived of a profound understanding of human nature regardless of skin color.

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1. Tarnel Abbott et al., “A timline of Jack London’s life,” *Jack London International*. <http://www.jack-london.org/timeline.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Steve Wiersum, “A short biography on Jack London,” YouTube video, Duration 4:27 min. Posted [March, 2014]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-p22IFu6ONM>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Today he is translated into nearly 100 languages. (see footnote 1) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ben Goldstein,”Jack London and Racism in America,” *The Jack London Project.* Last modified October 19, 2016. <https://www.jacklondonproject.com/single-post/2016/10/19/Jack-London-and-Racism-in-America> The author is the founder of the *Jack London Project* and producer of several popular documentaries about him.I have chosen this article to represent the image of Jack London in popular culture and I will refer to it further in my essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jack London, *Complete Works of Jack London* (Hastings, East Sussex: Delphi Publishing Ltd, 2014), location 138048-138057. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. old-used word for a Chinese person [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. location 96191-96195. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. King Hendricks, “Jack London Master Craftsman of the Short Story.” 33th Faculty Honor Lecture (Logan:Utah State University Press, 1966), 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Jack London, *Complete Works of Jack London* (Hastings, East Sussex: Delphi Publishing Ltd, 2014), location 96145. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jeanne Campbell Reesman, *Jack London's Racial Lives: a Critical Biography* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jack London, *Complete Works of Jack London* (Hastings, East Sussex: Delphi Publishing Ltd, 2014), location 96126. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. location 96370. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Jeanne Campbell Reesman, *Jack London's Racial Lives: a Critical Biography* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009),145 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. p.16 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. in his article "Race and Race Theory," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 169-85 Howard Winant discusses the non-biological origin of the concept of race. He argues that the term gained its current popular usage in the light of international imperialistic/colonial economic and political historical events that shaped an artificial base of a fictive and hallow notion masked as Enlightenment rationality. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Dale L. Ross, “Jack London:An American Dilemma,” *Jurnal of American Culture 5*, no.4 (winer 1982): 57-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ben Goldstein,”Jack London and Racism in America,” *The Jack London Project.* Last modified October 19, 2016. <https://www.jacklondonproject.com/single-post/2016/10/19/Jack-London-and-Racism-in-America> [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Jeanne Campbell Reesman, *Jack London's Racial Lives: a Critical Biography* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Lawrence I. Berkove, "Jack London and Evolution: From Spencer to Huxley," American Literary Realism 36, no. 3 (2004): 243-55. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27747141>. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid, 7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Jack London, “A Bit of Data on the Japanese Question,” *Australian Star* 1909. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. In her Introduction Reesman points out that London was “so conflicted about his own racial identity that his writings on race more clearly resemble the work of minority writers of color than the work of his white mainstream contemporaries.” [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Jeanne Campbell Reesman, *Jack London's Racial Lives: a Critical Biography* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)