

Beyond the Abyss: Jack London and the Working Class

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The first thing that comes to mind in relation to the writings of Jack London is their lasting popularity. Works such as *The Call of the Wild* (1903), *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), *White Fang* (1906), *The Iron Heel* (1908) and *Martin Eden* (1909) have all remained firm favourites among readers both in America and around the world. However, in contrast to much other popular fiction, these books by London have also acquired an iconic status as modern literary classics. Writing about the centenary of London's birth in 1976, Robert Barltrop noted:

Most popular fiction is essentially ephemeral, having no virtue beyond meeting some need of the hour [...] But if a writer continues to give satisfaction to large numbers of people for a long enough period, he becomes entitled to a place of respect in literature. The needs he meets have been shown to be not transient. It is sixty years since Jack London died, and seventy since his major books were written. Most of them are reprinted throughout the literate world. He cannot be dismissed.
(1976: 179)

In a similar vein, Andrew Sinclair, one of London's many biographers, also pointed to the impact this continued popular appreciation of London's work has had on the critics: "In the past decade, intellectual fashion and literary criticism have begun to resurrect Jack London as a great American author, whom the people have never forgotten" (1978: 250). More recently, Alex Kershaw locates London's lasting appeal in the fusion of life and work that lies at the heart of his writing: "That millions around the globe still read his books is testament not only to the brilliance of his descriptive imagery [...] Above all, what keeps Jack London alive – long after his death – is the passion and energy with which he lived, and which still sustains his best prose" (1998: 303).

Another of the distinguishing marks about Jack London was his working-class origins and the influence this had on his writing. It is also this fact that makes him such an unusual American author in the twentieth century. Irving Stone writes in particular of the decisive effect London's formative years had on him: "He was raised in poverty, he

knew hunger and deprivation, he had learned harrowing lessons about the fate of the labouring man” (1967: 67). Barltrop also reasserts the importance of London’s proletarian literary credentials: “Jack London was in all senses the working man’s writer” (1979: 1), while Jonah Raskin, in one of the most recent collections of London’s radical writings, states that “he came to represent the downtrodden, the outcast, and the disinherited” (2008: 3). At the same time, Raskin also suggests that London’s own experience of class migration from factory worker to successful writer left him with a troubling sense of allegiance towards his own class, an ambivalence that was characterised by both fear and longing: “He felt, too, that he stood at the edge of an abyss, both interior and exterior, and he explored with passion and compassion the lives of the people of the abyss” (2008: 1). This concept of the abyss and the way it came to represent Jack London’s conflicting images of the working class are what I want to explore further in this essay. In particular, I want to show how there is a problematic tension between London’s perception of the poor as an oppressed, victimised and often degenerate collective and his much more positive depiction of individual members of that class. The key text to focus on in this connection is *The People of the Abyss* (1903), London’s own “Glimpse of Inferno” as he called his stay in the East End of London in the summer of 1902 (2001: 27). In this classic work of social reportage, there is, I would claim, an underlying ideological contradiction between the portrayal of an amorphous and demoralised lumpenproletariat and that of the actual working-class people whom London met and whose energy, resourcefulness, articulation and humanity shine through the abysmal condition of their lives.

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London’s own heroic efforts to overcome his childhood neglect and lack of education have lead critics and biographers to sometimes view him in nineteenth century philosophical terms as the proverbial Nietzschean superman, a blond beast who succeeded in a life-and-death struggle to emancipate himself from his poverty-stricken background. This, it is claimed, not only determined London’s view of the rest of his class from which he had managed to escape, it also created the psychological basis for his later elitism, racism and “obsessive terror of degradation” (Sinclair 1978: 66). Sinclair speculates for instance in this social

Darwinist direction by stating: “To Jack, the survival of the fittest race must precede the victory of the fittest proletariat” (1978: 75). Commenting on London’s relation to the working class, Richard O’Connor is another biographer who claims that London’s personal and political antipathies were so conflated that he ended up being a “Socialist who believed in the leveling process of revolution at the same time as he raised up the image of a Superman who would rightfully dominate the stupid herd” (1965: 122). The same elitist mantra is repeated by Alex Kershaw, who writes: “Above all, Nietzsche provided Jack with an argument to validate egotism. For it was through him that Jack would discover the theory of the ‘superman’ – better, stronger, wiser than other men, who would overcome all obstacles. In his quest for power, the superman would speed the selection of the fittest” (1998: 77). In support of this line of biographical correlation, critics have been keen to draw parallels between London and his own larger-than-life fictional characters, in particular Wolf Larsen in *The Sea Wolf* and Martin in *Martin Eden*. It was, however, a comparison that London himself strongly resisted, as Sinclair admits: “/H/e resented people who identified him only with the primordial beast in Larsen” (1978: 96). George Orwell went perhaps the farthest in this trend in literary and biographical correspondence by suggesting that it was a fascist trait in London’s own psychological make-up that allowed him to understand how the slum masses could be so easily and dangerously manipulated, as is shown in his novel *The Iron Heel*, by the ruthless dictatorship of the Oligarchy:

London could foresee Fascism because he had a Fascist streak in himself: or at any rate a marked strain of brutality and an almost unconquerable preference for the strong man as against the weak man [...] his instinct lay towards acceptance of a “natural aristocracy” of strength, beauty and talent. Intellectually he knew [...] that Socialism ought to mean the meek inheriting the earth, but that was not what his temperament demanded. (Orwell 1968: 25-6)

There is behind all this speculative literary psychology an attempt to discredit London’s commitment to socialism and the working class. Without doubt, London was an individualist autodidact, who adopted conflicting ideas and social philosophies sometimes haphazardly, but it was also his own proletarian experience that gave his thought its radical political edge. London knew himself what real poverty was like and how it could destroy people’s lives. He strove with great determination to

escape from its terrifying clutches. However, in his depiction of the slums, it is true London often reverts to the clichéd conventions of sensationalist, yellow-press journalism. For example, the image of an urban abyss, in which the struggle for survival is expressed in social Darwinist terms, was a well-established trope at the time, something that London recycled uncritically in his own writing.¹ The term “The People of the Abyss” for instance, London borrowed from H.G.Wells who, in his book *Anticipations* (1902), referred to the “great useless masses of people, the People of the Abyss” (1902: 211).² In words typical of the Victorian sociological debate, Wells depicts an inexorable process of degeneracy and decline of an ultimately doomed species of primitive slum dwellers:

[T]his bulky irremovable excretion, the appearance of these gall stones of vicious, helpless, and pauper masses. There seems every reason to suppose that this phenomenon of unemployed citizens, who are, in fact, unemployable, will remain present as a class, perishing individually and individually renewed, so long as civilization remains progressive and experimental upon its present lines. Their drowning existences may be utilized, the crude hardship of their lot may be concealed or mitigated, they may react upon the social fabric that is attempting to eliminate them, in very astounding ways, but their presence and their individual doom, it seems to me, will be unavoidable – at any rate, for many generations of men. They are an integral part of this physiological process of mechanical progress,

¹ In his anthology, *Into Unknown England 1866-1913: Selections from the Social Explorers*, Peter Keating writes of the Victorian connotations of the Abyss: “An abyss still conveys enough sense of distance to be attractive to the social explorer, but it carries with it an eeriness which replaces the more exotic associations of travel. You don’t journey *to* an abyss: you descend or fall into it. It is all very well claiming that a Dark Continent lies at one’s doorstep but that metaphorically is more welcome than a gaping hole. And what may walk out of an African rain forest is one thing, what *climbs* out of an abyss is quite another” (1976: 20-1).

² In *The Iron Heel*, London writes: “*The people of the abyss* – this phrase was struck out by the genius of H. G. Wells in the late nineteenth century A.D. Wells was a sociological seer, sane and normal as well as warmly human. Many fragments of his work have come down to us, while two of his greatest achievements, ‘Anticipations’ and ‘Mankind in the Making’, have come down intact” (2006: 180-1).

as inevitable in the social body as are waste matters and disintegrating cells in the body of an active and healthy man. (1902: 81-2)

Similar socially determinist prejudice can, without doubt, be found scattered throughout London's writings, not least in *The People of the Abyss*. However, as I will try to show, these are primarily used as the rhetorical framing of his exposé of slum life, something that is constantly subverted by the portrayal of individual East Enders with whom London came into contact. The life stories of these people fundamentally undermine the image of a feckless class of poor that was being evolved out of existence by some ineluctable process of natural selection.

Not surprisingly, the opening chapter of *The People of the Abyss*, entitled "The Descent", introduces the reader to the characteristic setting of a Victorian slum, a primordial underworld populated by a race of subhuman Morlocks who, as in H. G. Wells's apocalyptic novel *The Time Machine* (1895), threaten almost physically to overwhelm the social explorer:

The streets were filled with a new and different race of people, short of stature, and of wretched or beer-sodden appearance [...] little children clustered like flies around a festering mass of fruit, thrusting their arms to the shoulders into the liquid corruption, and drawing forth morsels but partially decayed, which they devoured on the spot [...] And as far as I could see were the solid walls of brick, the slimy pavements, and the screaming streets; and for the first time in my life the fear of the crowd smote me. It was like the fear of the sea; and the miserable multitudes, street upon street, seemed so many waves of a vast and malodorous sea, lapping about me and threatening to well up and over me. (2001: 3-4)

Doubtlessly, the nightmarish atmosphere in a passage like the above touches upon some deep-seated anxieties, yet at the same time London's description is contrived, melodramatic and full of mixed metaphors—racial, animal and maritime—that leave one wondering about the reality that lies behind. What we can also discern is the voice of London himself as an up-and-coming writer-turned-reporter, straining for dramatic effect, producing sensational copy that would, hopefully, both impress editors and shock readers back home in America.

In contrast, however, the first representative of this exotic urban jungle that London meets, described in a chapter called "A Man and the Abyss", presents us with a very different view of the slums: a young Cockney sailor, who alternates between working at sea as a stoker and

enjoying a more pleasure-seeking unemployed existence on land. A decidedly happy-go-lucky character, whose lifestyle consciously challenges the traditional domestic ideals extolled by London himself in the book. Moreover, subverting the Victorian stereotype of the semi-inarticulate slum dweller, this young man is both verbally fluent and full of humorous scepticism towards the kind of patriarchal family values and work ethic that London deems to recommend to him. Clearly, there is much here to affront the moralising Victorian philanthropist who, like London, bemoans the intemperance of the poor. Despite London's attempts to discredit him and his dissipated lifestyle, the youth comes across as a real Artful Dodger, who takes his fun while he can, because he knows just how precarious life can be in the slums. He is a streetwise figure almost straight out of Dickens:

'Garn!' he cried, with a playful shove of his fist on my shoulder. 'Wot's yer game, eh? A missus kissin' an' kids clim'in', an' kettle singin', all on four poun' ten a month w'en you 'ave a ship, an' four nothin' w'en you 'aven't. I'll tell you wot I'd get on four poun' ten – a missus rowin', kids squallin', no coal t' make the kettle sing, an' the kettle up the spout, that's wot I'd get. Enough t' make a bloke bloomin' well glad to be back t' sea. A missus! Wot for? T' make you mis'erable? Kids? Jest take my counsel, matey, an' don't 'ave 'em. Look at me! I can 'ave beer w'en I like, an' no blessed missus an' kids a-crying for bread. I'm 'appy, I am. With my beer an' mates like you, an' a good ship comin', an' another trip to sea. So I say, let's 'ave another pint. Arf an' arf's good enough for me.' (2001: 18-9)

Despite the impression of a lively young worker making the best of his chances for what enjoyment his income can afford, London's reaction is overbearingly negative, condemning the man as an "unconscious hedonist, utterly unmoral and materialistic" (2001: 19). It is as though the middle-class observer in London is challenged by someone who harbours no illusions about what sort of family life is on offer at four pounds a week. Since his appeals about the attractions of "a wife and children" and a "home of your own" (18) all fall on stony ground, London is left perplexed, able only to conclude with an exasperated Malthusian outburst that "day by day I became convinced that not only is it unwise, but it is criminal for the people of the Abyss to marry":

They are the stones by the builder rejected. There is no place for them, in the social fabric, while all the forces of society drive them downward till they perish. At the bottom of the Abyss they are feeble, besotted, and imbecile. If they reproduce, the life is so cheap that performe it perishes of itself. The work of the world goes on

above them, and they do no care to take part in it, nor are they able. Moreover, the work of the world does not need them. There are plenty, far fitter than they, clinging to the steep slope above, and struggling frantically to slide no more. (2001: 20)

This bitter attack on the improvidence of the poor seems a far cry from the rebel hobo that London was once himself and about which he wrote much more sympathetically in his essay “The Road” (1897), referring to young social drop-outs like the above as “romantic and unruly boys, who venture along its dangerous ways in search of fortune or in rash attempt to escape parental discipline” (Quoted in Raskin 2008: 65).

What I am trying to argue here is that there is a disconcerting narrative gap in *The People of the Abyss* between London’s intellectual apprehension of slum life, which is distant and usually damning, and his actual depiction of the people themselves. In the latter context, London goes on to document a range of individual case studies that point to an East End population that is not only more resilient, but also much more aware and consciously critical of their social and economic predicament.

The experience of two homeless men, one who has worked as a carter, the other as a carpenter, provides another early illustration in the text of this curious discrepancy between what London thinks and what he sees. Despite their state of abject destitution, it is nevertheless clear that it is old age that has brought the two men low, not alcohol or crime. London is nevertheless horrified to observe how they are driven by hunger to eat scraps of food they find in the gutter, proof, it seems, of their degenerate physical and mental status:

From the slimy, spittle-drenched, sidewalk, they were picking up bits of orange peel, apple skin, and grape stems, and they were eating them. The pits of greengage plums they cracked between their teeth for the kernels inside. They picked up stray bits of bread the size of peas, apple cores so black and dirty one would not take them to be apple cores, and these things these two men took into their mouths, and chewed them, and swallowed them; and this, between six and seven o’clock in the evening of August 20, year of our Lord 1902, in the heart of the greatest, wealthiest, and most powerful empire the world has ever seen. (2001: 39)

The passage is purposely italicised in the text in order to accentuate its didactic impact. It is an example of London’s rhetorical use throughout the book of contrasting the glaring inequalities between high and low in order to show how society creates enormous wealth but is incapable of sharing it. In particular the riches that are flaunted in connection with the

then ongoing celebrations of the coronation of Edward VII. There is certainly a strong sense of radical indignation in a passage like the above, but also an element of morbid fascination with the depths of human degradation to which the poor could sink. However, once London gets to talk to these two men on a more personal level, another, more complex insight emerges into their working-class experience and outlook. It is significant, for instance, that when London reveals himself as the visiting journalist he actually is, one who has money in his pocket, the instinctive class suspicions of the two men are immediately aroused: “And at once they shut up like clams. I was not of their kind; my speech had changed, the tones of my voice were different, in short, I was a superior, and they were superbly class conscious” (2001: 43).

During their search for a dosshouse bed for the night, London is clearly impressed by the men’s eloquence and political awareness, even though he abstains from actually quoting what they say about the world and the way it is divided up. This would of course further complicate London’s portrayal of the inhabitants of the East End as passive and generally unreflecting victims of circumstances. Their discussion is therefore left rather vague. One would have loved to hear what the men really have to say, but we are only left with London’s own remarks that remain patronisingly dismissive of their views:

These two men talked. They were not fools, they were merely old. And, naturally, their guts a-reek with pavement offal, they talked of bloody revolution. They talked as anarchists, fanatics and madmen would talk. And who shall blame them? In spite of my three good meals that day, and the snug bed I could occupy if I wished, and my social philosophy, and my evolutionary belief in the slow development and metamorphosis of things – in spite of this, I say, I felt impelled to talk rot with them or hold my tongue. Poor fools! Not of their sort are revolutions bred. And when they are dead and dust, which will be shortly, other fools will talk bloody revolution as they gather offal from the spittle-drenched sidewalk along Mile End Road to Poplar Workhouse. (2001: 39)

What is significant is not only how London reveals more about his own opinions than those of the two homeless men, but also how he exerts himself to allay any possible concerns about social revolution on the part of his readers. Referring to journalists who, like London, went slumming among the masses, Peter Keating notes that an “element of class fear, whether from contagious diseases or revolution, is never entirely absent from the work of early social explorers, but the repeated use of the word

'abyss' marks a real change of attitude. It reflects a feeling of despair at worsening social conditions and at the inability of existing institutions to deal with the problem; it reflects also a corresponding concern of growing militancy of the working-class movement that was apparent in public demonstrations, politics, and trade union activity" (1976: 20). In London's case, it is perhaps more surprising that he recycles the stereotyped, middle-class prejudice that working-class radicalism was linked to social anarchy and acts of bomb-throwing terrorism. This politically dubious suggestion recurs on a number of occasions throughout the book. For example, when London asks a man sleeping rough on a bench in Green Park what he thinks of the Coronation procession, his feelings of violent desperation are recorded, but left without further explication:

'I couldn't sleep, a-lyin' there an' thinkin' 'ow I'd worked all the years o' my life an' now 'ad no plyce to rest my 'ead; an' the music comin' to me, an' the cheers an' cannon, till I got almost a hanarchist an' wanted to blow out the brains o' the Lord Chamberlain.' (2001: 77)

Another example of the politically conscious worker whom London meets in the abyss is Dan Cullen, a former docker and trade unionist, who has been blacklisted for years by the employers as punishment for his active commitment to the cause of labour. Not only does the meeting with this old militant compel London to drop at least for a while the social Darwinist jargon he often reverts to in his reportage. It also affords him a glimpse into some of the social and economic forces that lie behind the impoverishment of the working class in the East End. Most of the inhabitants London meets do not shirk work. Indeed, they work harder than most in trying to get by. It is the class system that crushes them, not some innate fecklessness or brutal ignorance. Dan Cullen represents the voice of the class-conscious worker, someone who has fought all his life both for himself and others. There is, therefore, a strong sense of hard-won experience, of real solidarity and of a radical spirit that has been done down by circumstances beyond his control:

The man who had occupied this hole, one Dan Cullen, docker, was dying in hospital. Yet he had impressed his personality on his miserable surroundings sufficiently to give an inkling as to what sort of man he was. On the walls were cheap pictures of Garibaldi, Engels, Dan Burns, and other labour leaders, while on the table lay one of Walter Besant's novels. He knew his Shakespeare, I was told, and had read history,

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sociology, and economics. And he was self-educated [...] He became a leader of the fruit-porters, represented the dockers on the London Trades Council, and wrote trenchant articles for the labour journals. (2001: 83-4)

Because of his efforts to improve the lot of his class, Cullen had for over ten years been given little or no work as a casual labourer by the employers in a cynical attempt to starve him into submission. London writes candidly of this blacklisting: “This is what is called being ‘disciplined’, or ‘drilled’. It means being starved. There is no politer word” (84). It is also significant to note, as London does, that, despite being brought low by both starvation and illness, Dan Cullen still wants no truck with moralising, middle-class philanthropists. When he discovers, for example, that the nurse who is washing him is the sister of Sir George Blank, “solicitor to the docks at Cardiff, who, more than any other man, had broken up the Dockers’ Union of Cardiff, and was knighted”, the old militant reasserts himself and his sense of solidarity based on class interest and not charity:

Thereupon Dan Cullen sat up on his crazy couch and pronounced anathema upon her and all her breed; and she fled, to return no more, strongly impressed with the ungratefulness of the poor. (85)

The same dismissive response is shown to a religious do-gooder who tries to bribe Cullen with “a pair of paper slippers, worth fourpence” (85) and prayers for his soul. In a gesture charged with meaning, London witnesses how an inhabitant of the abyss is not always ready to sell himself at any cost: “He asked the missionary kindly to open the window, so that he might toss the slippers out. And the missionary went away, to return no more, likewise impressed with the ungratefulness of the poor” (85).

The role of charity is a central issue in London’s reportage, since it relates to the whole question of what sort of public assistance the poor were to receive. The Victorian poor laws were generally harsh and restrictive, very much influenced by the Malthusian claim that the poor were incapable of helping themselves and charity would therefore only prolong the agony of their inevitable demise. As Gareth Stedman Jones writes, quoting from the debate of the time about the different categories of the so-called “nomad poor”: “Twenty per cent were ‘genuinely unemployed’; another forty per cent were ‘feckless and incapable’. The

remaining forty per cent however were wholly degenerate: ‘physically, mentally and morally unfit, there is nothing that the nation can do for these men except to let them die out by leaving them alone’” (1976: 288-9). This cynical refusal to see poverty as a consequence of broader, laissez-faire economic forces and instead to put the blame on the individual poor themselves has been a recurring theme in the public debate about welfare “scroungers” in Britain through to our own times.³

London’s own attitude to the poor is contradictory, as I have tried to show. In theory, he subscribes to the Malthusian discourse, but in practice the reality of people’s lives tells a very different tale. On only one occasion in the book does London acknowledge, however, the ideological prejudice that threatens to undermine the documentary value of his account. It is a strange and sudden admission that is left, unfortunately, without any further comment: “Sometimes I become afraid of my own generalizations upon the massed misery of this Ghetto life, and feel that my impressions are exaggerated, that I am too close to the picture and lack perspective” (2001: 120).

These discrepancies become glaring, however, when London compares the standard of living of a person in regular work and the life of someone who is both unemployed and homeless. It is in this perspective that the option of charity, or a night spent in the “casual ward”, exposes the punitive function of so-called poor relief, and why the poor would seek to avoid such help at all costs. London is forced to admit that the help of such institutions was in fact a philanthropic cover for the cruel exploitation of those who are at the bottom of the social scale:

³ In a recent article, “A portrait of 21st century poverty”, Amelia Gentleman writes: “The tabloid portrayal of the poor as idle scroungers has done a lot to weaken public sympathy for the cause, even though new data shows that the majority of children living in poverty have at least one parent who is working, but who is paid so little that the family remains below the breadline. The emphasis on child poverty, rather than just poverty generally, is partly aimed at deflating this tendency to blame the poor – the argument being that you can’t blame the children for their situation – but it has still failed to energise public support for the cause” (2009).

It is a matter of sober calculation, here in England, that it is softer to work for twenty shillings a week, and have regular food, and a bed at night, than it is to walk the streets. The man who walks the streets suffers more, and works harder, for far less return. I have depicted the nights they spend, and how, driven in by physical exhaustion, they go to the casual ward for a 'rest up'. Nor is the casual ward a soft snap. To pick four pounds of oakum, break twelve hundredweight of stones, or perform the most revolting tasks, in return for the miserable food and shelter they receive, is an unqualified extravagance on the part of the men who are guilty of it. On the part of the authorities it is sheer robbery. They give the men far less for their labour than do the capitalist employers. (2001: 103)

The same prospect applies to women who are faced with the gates of the workhouse, that Malthusian instrument of collective punishment that became the most hated symbol of the Victorian poor law. "I'll drown myself before I go into the workhouse", says Ellen Hughes Hunt, who refuses to accompany her poverty-stricken husband to a paupers' prison and who is later declared insane after drowning herself in Regent's Canal. London's reactions to her tragic fate go beyond all the deterministic rhetoric about the ultimate demise of the poor and touch instead upon the real life-and-death choices of such unfortunate individuals: "As to which is the preferable sojourning place is a matter of opinion, of intellectual judgement. I, for one, from what I know of canals and workhouses, should choose the canal, were I in a similar position. And I make bold to contend that I am no more insane than Ellen Hughes Hunt" (2001: 142).

The reference to the fate of this individual woman of the abyss is also unusual in that London's book is generally biased towards the men. There are more personal encounters with men than women. However, even more stereotypically, the collective images of the abysmal netherworld are mostly associated with demoralised, dishevelled and debased females, often mothers, to whom London reacts with particular horror. These women seem to epitomize in London's mind the most shocking aspect of subhumanity in the East End and he both begins and ends his book with examples of this particular form of female depravity. One of the recurring images of the moral degeneration of the slums, as portrayed in the fiction of writers of this time such as George Gissing and Arthur Morrison, is that of a street fight between two women, a scene that plays on all the scopophilic fascination and horror of the male observer. London follows on in this gendered tradition by depicting a similar outburst of female street violence:

As I write this, and for an hour past, the air has been made hideous by a free-for-all, rough-and-tumble fight going on in the yard that is back to back with my yard. When the first sounds reached me I took it for the barking and snarling of dogs, and some minutes were required to convince me that human beings, and women at that, could produce such a fearful clamour.

Drunken women fighting! It is not nice to think of; it is far worse to listen to.

(2001: 25)

The self-revelatory detail here is the reference to dogs, a comparison that suggests the primitive bestiality of these women who fight like animals. The fact that a child is involved in the fight is a further moral pointer that these women are so much less than human for having abandoned their proper maternal instincts. London recycles in this way yet another clichéd image of the negative parental capabilities of the poor. This trope goes back a long way. The same sort of middle-class moral outrage is reflected in William Hogarth's painting of *Gin Lane* (1751), in which he depicts a drunken mother letting her baby fall helplessly from her breast down some stone steps in a London backstreet. Towards the end of his own journey into the abyss, London repeats this attack on unnatural mothers in another social Darwinist tirade about an urban zoo whose inhabitants are more ape-like than human:

But they were not the only beasts that ranged the menagerie. They were only here and there, lurking in dark courts and passing like grey shadows along the walls; but the women from whose rotten loins they spring were everywhere. They whined insolently, and in maudlin tones begged me for pennies, and worse. They held carouse in every boozing ken, slatternly, unkempt, bleary-eyed, and towsled, leering and gibbering, overflowing with foulness and corruption, and, gone in debauch, sprawling across benches and bars, unspeakably repulsive, fearful to look upon.

(2001: 152)

The above passage is permeated with all the social and sexual fears of the male social explorer, being openly solicited by these slum women. London's lurid, hyperbolic description not only plays upon the middle-class panic about sexual promiscuity and infection, but also the accompanying eugenic debate about the dissipated poor whose destiny it is to disappear, the sooner the better, from the face of the earth. It seems as though the complete debasement of these women is the final proof that such people have lost all semblance of human feeling and are therefore unfit to reproduce their own kind.

Such sweeping Malthusian generalisations are, however, once more put into question by those few individual women of the abyss whom London does manage to meet and speak to. Here, instead of demoralised and drunken harridans, we find hard-working wives and mothers who have managed to carve out a life for themselves and their families. They most certainly do not belong to a population of irredeemable shirkers, but are women with a strong sense of parental duty, who have also succeeded through their own efforts to survive in an extremely hostile social environment. The person who epitomises this ordinary day-to-day domestic struggle is “The Sea Wife”, whom London meets in Maidstone while he is on the trail of the migrant labourers that leave the city for the hop-picking season in Kent. Moreover, London’s encounter with Mr and Mrs Mugridge confront him with yet another contrast to the colonialist concept of a descent into darkest England: “I went down through the skin and the flesh to the naked soul of it, and in Thomas Mugridge and his old woman gripped hold of the essence of this remarkable English breed” (2001: 94). What London is trying to say, once one peels away the metaphysical jargon, is that, in this so-called netherworld, he keeps coming across living and feeling men and women, not some degenerate collective subspecies. The contradiction in the text between ideological abstraction and social reality is thus once again apparent. Yet London himself never reflects critically on this contrast between the way the poor are demonized in the public debate and the indefatigable efforts of hard-working people he comes across in his travels. Mrs Mugridge turns out to be just one more of this remarkable class of toilers who has worked continuously from childhood to old age, bringing up fifteen children along the way:

Mrs Mugridge was seventy-three. From seven years of age she had worked in the fields, doing a boy’s work at first, and later a man’s. She still worked, keeping the house shining, washing, boiling, and baking, and, with my advent, cooking for me and shaming me by making my bed. At the end of threescore years and more of work they possessed nothing, had nothing to look forward to save more work.

(2001: 94-5)

London’s overall characterisation of the old couple remains, nevertheless, typically condescending, referring to their conversation in animalistic terms “as meditative and vacant as the chewing of a heifer’s cud” (2001: 95). Indeed, he sees the old woman primarily as a patient

and uncomplaining breeder of cannon fodder, part of a working population who “docilely [...] yield the best of its sons to fight and colonise to the ends of the earth” (2001: 94). Once again, he feels impelled to suggest there is no threat of political revolt from these hard done to people, something that the reader is meant to feel either as a pity or a relief, it is unclear which.

When *The People of the Abyss* was serialized in an American periodical, *Wilshire's Magazine*, in 1903, it was an immediate publishing success, transforming London's status as a popular writer: “Previously known mainly to the socialists of the west coast, London now became a national figure” (Lindsay 1978: 6). It was also as a book much debated in the press, both in Britain and America. Most reviewers were positive, impressed by the documentary power of London's investigation of the slums. As the British *The Independent* newspaper wrote, London “made it real and present to us” (Quoted in Lindsay 1978: 7). Later on in his life, London was to refer to the work as his own particular favourite: “Of all my books, I love most *The People of the Abyss*. No other book of mine took so much of my young heart and tears as that study of the economic degradation of the poor” (Quoted in Kearshaw 1998: 119). Upton Sinclair nevertheless recalled how fundamentally traumatic the whole experience of visiting the East End had been for London: “[F]or years afterwards the memories of this stunted and depraved population haunted him beyond all peace” (Quoted in Lindsay 1978: 6). These two very differing personal reactions—empathy and horror—sum up the underlying dichotomy in London's depiction of the East End poor. Torn between his preconceived ideas of a social Darwinist slum jungle and the much more sympathetic personal impression that working-class people had on him, the book itself struggles with a narrative contradiction that remains unresolved and deeply problematic. As I have tried to show in this essay, despite London's Malthusian rhetoric, the individual members of the East End working class come across in his book as far from helpless and hopelessly doomed to destruction. Almost writing subconsciously back at himself, London subverts his own demonised collective image of degradation by introducing the reader to a range of characters, who express a profounder understanding, a greater resilience and a more playful sense of humour than the subterranean concept of the people of the abyss could ever suggest.

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