

# *Schopenhauer in Jack London's The Sea-Wolf: A Comparative Analysis*

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**Abstract:** As a notable work of American nautical fiction, *The Sea-Wolf* is a defining work of the novelist Jack London in his early career, paving the way for his future adventurous novels, including *The Iron Heel*, *Martin Eden*, and *White Fang*. This comparative study aims to inquire on Schopenhauerian philosophy's affinities with London's *The Sea-Wolf* by examining the antagonist, Wolf Larsen's materialistic philosophy, and investigating Larsen as a Schopenhauerian genius and his controversial characterization as a Nietzschean Übermensch.

**Keywords:** Jack London, *The Sea-Wolf*, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Wolf Larsen, superman, genius

## 1. Introduction

The relationship between the two German philosophers, Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche, oftentimes could be seen as a “teacher-student” relationship, as widely believed by many. As Tom Stern puts it, “[t]here can be no doubt that, without Schopenhauer, there would have been no Nietzsche” [1]. In 1883, Nietzsche published *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, a work discussing his renowned Übermensch concept (also translated as superman, or overman). Though in later years Nietzsche departed from Schopenhauer in his philosophy, the concept of Übermensch remained highly crucial throughout Nietzsche's career. Chiefly, superman is the “master of himself” [2], an active individual following the master morality and in Nietzschean explanations, disconnected from Christian beliefs. Although Nietzsche regarded it as “the meaning of the earth” [2], for “[t]here has never yet been a Superman” [2].

Two decades later, in 1904, prolific American novelist Jack London continued the philosophical thinking of the two philosophers. *The Sea-Wolf* narrates a misadventure from the perspective of a rather traditional figure, Humphrey van Weyden, the moral idealist, in opposition to Wolf Larsen, the brutal antagonist of *The Sea-Wolf* and a highly condensed amalgam of their philosophical ideas, who exemplifies a constant battle for individual existence. From “stand[ing] on dead men's legs” [3] to “rescue us from ourselves” [3], van Weyden underwent a complete transformation from a self-claimed “gentleman” [3] to a partial figure of masculinity, eventually falling in love with Maud Brewster, the rescued passenger, literati and the heroine.

In his book *No Mentor But Myself*, London wrote that he had been “more stimulated by Nietzsche than by any other writer in the world” [4]. After *The Sea-Wolf*’s first publication in 1904, varied interpretations had been made arguing his intentions on Nietzschean ideas, social Darwinism, and materialism, to name a few. Nonetheless, heretofore few, or no scholars had attempted to examine the influences of German philosopher Schopenhauer’s philosophies in the work or the shared affinities between them. But rather many scholars focused on interpreting the Nietzschean ideas in the work. This is due to London’s work in close association with Nietzsche and Nietzschean concepts, notably “Übermensch,” or superman. Controversial in London’s effectiveness in conveying Nietzschean ideas, the figure of Larsen, the novel’s “superman,” was the key point above all to analyze.

In *The Sea-Wolf*, van Weyden’s friend Charley Furuseth, a figure only mentioned a few times throughout the work, was to “read Nietzsche and Schopenhauer to rest his brain” [3]. This sets the foundation of *The Sea-Wolf* as an implicit reference to both Nietzschean and Schopenhauerian philosophy, that in his later career, London wrote in a letter that:

Long years ago, at the very beginning of my writing career, I attacked Nietzsche and his superman idea. This was in *The Sea-Wolf*. Lots of people read *The Sea-Wolf*, no one discovered that it was an attack upon the super-man philosophy [5].

Although London’s intentions, according to his own, are to criticize the Nietzschean idea of superman. Yet, the core value and reason of Wolf Larsen’s materialistic and hedonistic philosophy could be better examined by Schopenhauerian philosophy. Hence, this study attempts to answer a) how might Wolf Larsen’s highly materialistic and hedonistic philosophy be explained and interpreted using Schopenhauerian philosophy, and b) what are the shared affinities between Larsen as a debatable Nietzschean Übermensch and a Schopenhauerian genius, as they both dealt with individualism, compassion, and a fantasized idealism both shared.

## 1.1. Related Work and Background

Insofar three major views remain, regarding to what extent London’s effort on presenting Larsen as a Nietzschean Übermensch is well-founded. These are, the superman characterization as a) a coincidental happening that London had no accurate knowledge of, b) an ingenuine superman, though limited traits are akin to Nietzsche’s ideas, and c) an accurate Nietzschean superman.

### 1.1.1. Larsen: A Coincidental Superman

Between the years 1909 and 1914, Dr Oscar Levy attempted the first English translation of Nietzsche, followed by Bernard Shaw [6]. Scholars weren’t entirely sure where to conclude London’s first reading of Nietzsche and hence, the German scholar’s influences on London. Moreover, in *The Sea-Wolf*, Wolf Larsen is, at times, more significantly in parallel to materialistic, social Darwinian and utilitarian ideas, rather than those of Nietzschean concepts. It became a peculiar subject to determine, whether London’s personal explanation was entirely valid.

In *Jack: A Biography of Jack London*, Andrew Sinclair suggests Larsen as a combination of “Melvill’s Ahab, Milton’s Lucifer, and seal-poacher Alexander McLean” and concluded London’s influences were to be “more from heroes of sagas and frontier traditions” [7]. The scholar further argued the elements Larsen and the Nietzschean superman share were coincidental at best since they were only from London’s friend, Frank Strawn-Hamilton, and magazines.

Kerstiens argued Larsen’s characterization to be heavy with the “conspicuous features of Darwinism” [6] and with the “concept of primordial” [6]. This is also supported by Hart’s work that suggests London’s intentions on Larsen were “concern[ed] with physical energy, the cult of ‘red blood’” [8].

### 1.1.2. Larsen: An Ingenuine Superman

Contrary to the sceptic belief, some scholars regarded Larsen as an imperfect specimen of the Nietzschean superman, that London's attempt was to be ingenuine. Ingrid Fortich found the superman concept an outdated philosophy in response to Christian ideals, evolving around the well-being of an individual, almost to be aristocratic [9].

Larsen's fierce, brutal image was built up by both his mental strength and foremost, his physical virility; for it was the body's utilitarian strength, that empowered his act of will, sexual harassment targeting Maud Brewster, the heroine. Nonetheless, soon after the crew's confrontation with Death Larsen, Wolf's Brother, the members abroad abandoned him with *The Ghost*. Among many other similar circumstances involving physical conflict, Charles Walcott suggests that Larsen is no superman since he lacks the "ability to make others serve without endangering himself" [10], but for the rest qualities, Larsen would epitomize anything of a Nietzschean superman. He further pointed out London's attempt was an imagined application of the superman philosophy in modern life, that it "cannot be successful" [10].

### 1.1.3. Larsen: An Accurate Superman

As discussed, London was familiar with Nietzsche to an extent unknown prior to the publication of *The Sea-Wolf*. Patrick Bridgwater suggested that after being inspired by his reading of Nietzsche's works, London, as a self-identified socialist, came to believe that "men cannot achieve its salvation without superman leaders and as his disenchantment with socialism grew, he put his hopes more on the individual" [11]. On the basis of individuals, the superman concept was inherently given a priority to the self, and so was Larsen's case in *The Sea-Wolf*.

Philip S. Foner, in *Jack London: American Rebel*, suggests that Larsen is a "perfect Nietzschean specimen, a man with a splendid body and a splendid mind" [12]. Larsen's actions are dependent on his will, guided by a natural impulse, almost as if a ferocious animal, and a vital force. Here, Forrest Parkay contributes to Larsen's holistic background and immediate environment as two primary factors of his materialism, with the intelligently guided brute force continued his existence and materialistically successful life, which at some point was viewed as a hedonist practice [13]. Eugene Kerstiens' findings support that of Parkay's, pointing out the harsh conditions had forced Larsen to rely on an anachronic atavism described by van Weyden, for this consistency remained throughout the novel, where Larsen recurrently exemplified the idea of survival of the fittest [6].

If as a Nietzschean superman, Larsen, indeed, rejects mutual cooperation, altruism, and socialism altogether, placing individual well-being above the expense of others. It is a subjective, self-minded tendency of the animalistic human London has created; yet a character with full autonomy of oneself, who recognizes the master-morality in his course of life, and creates his own materialistic set of philosophy rather than abiding by the traditional sets of value, a born evolution. Yet regarding the great individual's mysterious fall at the end, Foner puts it as "a logical result of the failure of individualism" [12].

## 1.2. Paper Structure

In the following part, I will use a point-by-point, compare-and-contrast method of analysis to investigate the affinities and connections between Schopenhauerian philosophy and Jack London's *The Sea-Wolf*. The three main aspects to discuss are a) Wolf Larsen's emphasis on materialism in a Schopenhauerian context, b) egoism derived out of materialism, and c) Larsen's character as a potential Schopenhauerian genius.

The nature of this analysis is literature research. *The World as Will and Representation* and *The Basis of Morality*, both by Schopenhauer, were selected; the prior was Schopenhauer's major

achievement in the philosophy subject, while the latter was Schopenhauer's submission to the Danish Royal Society of Sciences' prized competition in 1837, though not selected. Intertextual connections based on these three works were examined in an attempt to explain and interpret the characterization of Wolf Larsen and *The Sea-Wolf* as a whole.

## 2. Analysis

### 2.1. Wolf Larsen's Materialism

In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer wrote that materialism "uses the law of causality as a thread to guide its progress; but by taking it as an intrinsically existing order of things, an eternal truth, it ignores the understanding, since causality exists only in and for the understanding" [14]. By pointing out the very law of causality, Schopenhauer posited materialism's coherent flaw; that is, the complete neglect of individuals' subjective understanding. Note the connection this flaw creates as an essential element that inextricably links to individualism, where Larsen embodied the fullest in *The Sea-Wolf*. Nonetheless, in retrospect, materialism "overlooked the fact that with even the simplest object it had already and at once posited the subject as well" [14]. Larsen, in response, said

'I believe that life is a mess,' he answered promptly. 'It is like yeast, a ferment, a thing that moves, and may move for a minute, an hour, a year, or a hundred years, but that in the end will cease to move. The big eat the little that they may continue to move; the strong eat the weak that they may retain their strength' [3].

Larsen's application of materialism on the floating hell, *The Ghost*, is bound to the reconstruction of humans into mere currency by, to a certain degree, being completely well aware of the positive aspects of it, abiding by his Spencerian and Darwinian ideas. Individual struggles, under Larsen's dominance, tended to be materialized and marginalized as mere movements: he sent a cabin boy to fix the rigging merely to traumatize him, beat Johnson for expressing discontent, and had the cook, Thomas Mugridge's foot bitten off by a shark. The striking understatement of else lives followed a hedonist practice, where Larsen's fierce Will to Power, in particular, outweighed the rest. "[T]he only value life has is what life puts upon itself, and it is, of course, overestimated, since it is of necessity prejudiced in its own favor" [3].

### 2.2. Egoism Derived from Materialism

It's no remarkable inference on how Larsen's materialistic philosophy developed into individualism and hedonism. However, cooperation and the capability of compassion, by an intrinsic disparity endowed an alienation to prior egocentric qualities, powerful enough that defies Larsen's dominant Will to Power and egoism, "the urgent impulse to exist, and exist under the best circumstances" [15]: that is,

Every one is directly conscious of himself, but of others only indirectly, through his mind's eye; and the direct impression asserts its right. In other words, [...] each person is himself the whole world; for all that is objective exists only indirectly [15].

Individuals perceive others in some sort as "mere phantoms," where genuinely, individualism came into formation, consequently invalidating the significance of the else but oneself; the cognitive gap between the self and the else. Larsen's arguments about life roots in the basis of his dominance over the rest: crew members, seal hunters, and of course, both van Weyden and Brewster. Schopenhauer's comparison that one's life as a microcosm of the macrocosm further explained the occurrence that the subjective self is to be better known by individuals only [14]. Above his apprehension, the physical component is to be a subordinate element to individualism. As Larsen said,

With immortality before me, altruism would be a paying business proposition. I might elevate my soul to all kinds of altitudes. But with nothing eternal before me but death, given for a brief spell this yeasty crawling and squirming which is called life, why, it would be immoral for me to perform any act that was a sacrifice [3].

Larsen's preceding condition of reality is well-established. In other words, quite accurately he discerned a fundamental basis of his barbaric, "unmoral" materialistic philosophy. It is this clear cognition of human mortality, fragility, and sickness that led to his self-affirmative comprehension; in the face of either mortality or his unknown sickness, compassion and cooperation became trivial businesses. On the basis of life, egoism flourishes, and thus Larsen became a hedonist if overly indulged. Larsen's frequent exaggeration of his beliefs, at times even with physical demonstration to van Weyden, quite mistakenly portrayed an extreme individualist case as a vast hedonist in exact, who construed a conflation of egoism and hedonism. Though sharing similarities in terms of its nature, the prior was restricted to the well-being of oneself, whilst the latter comes above an insidious approach to pleasure, which marks the subtlety of the two.

In close examination of Larsen's egoist nature, it is more of "a piece of recognized hypocrisy" [15] in an application. This hypocrisy is a result of both one's well-being and self-preserving. For Larsen, well-being is sustained by materialistic maintenance, while acts of self-preserving antecede the prior by the law of causality—a mandate condition. Self-preserving is inextricably tangled with external factors, imminent danger from the surroundings enforced, for example. Larsen's major concern remained under his limited subjective will, leading to a limited "greed, gluttony, lust, selfishness, avarice, covetousness, injustice, hardness of heart, pride, arrogance, etc." [15] where only on *The Ghost* applies to. Without the isolated sea, the extension of land, the superman is to be no Nietzschean superman at all but a rather foolish, self-minded bigot, if any. And as London suggests in *The Sea-Wolf*, is likely to fall physically and mentally.

While it remains true that to determine an applicable status of Larsen's philosophy and the Nietzschean superman in a wider population of morality is impossible, his "unmoral" philosophy is certainly to be found superior in individual perspectives, which induced indispensable consequences of acts of Will, of suffering and loss. "He was not immoral, but merely unmoral" [3].

### 2.3. Larsen As an Inaccurate Schopenhauerian Genius

Similar to Nietzsche's "superman" concept, the Schopenhauerian genius, the "greatest exception in nature" [14], is to be found sharing resemblances with Larsen's characterization. In *The Sea-Wolf*, in a peculiar fashion, Larsen was being depicted. Exceptionally atavistic in the image, the animalistic figure incorporated an inner side, the intellectual character with knowledge from readings: Darwin, Spencer, and Shakespeare, to name a few.

Firstly, Larsen's aesthetic appearances, portraying sublimed handsomeness and almost a natural gaiety to van Weyden, were described beyond the austerity of a body. "'Utility,' he interrupted. 'This body was made for use. These muscles were made to grip and tear and destroy living things that get between me and life. Feel them,' he commanded" [3]. Larsen's masculine traits, as if purposely infused, were designated to serve the materialistic philosophy and the idea of Schopenhauerian artistic genius perfectly by being "eternal Ideas, the permanent, essential forms of the world and all its appearances" [14]. Despite the degradation of his virility due to his long sickness, on Endeavor Island, Larsen remained a major threat to van Weyden and Brewster, and until his cease of life he became a part of van Weyden's new moral idealism. The human genius is, in fact

[C]onstantly on the look-out for new objects that would be worth considering, and they long, almost always in vain, for the company of creatures similar to themselves, equals in whom they can really confide; in the meantime, ordinary mortals are completely engaged with and satisfied by the

ordinary present, entering into it and finding people like themselves everywhere, deriving a sort of contentment from everyday life that is denied to genius [14].

Born as the “peasants of the sea,” Wolf Larsen’s life was predominantly associated with his nautical experience: “cabin-boy at twelve, ship’s boy at fourteen, ordinary seaman at sixteen, able seaman at seventeen and cock of the fo’c’s’le” [3], and in *The Sea-Wolf*, master of *The Ghost*. Larsen’s close attachment with maritime experiences limited exchanges of literature, philosophy, and ethics with literati, Humphrey and Brewster, for example. If not in such pursuit, Larsen would then share more affinities with his brother, Death Larsen, an absolute “abysmal brute.” Despite his limited familial stock to raise greatness, Larsen’s pursuit of philosophy and ideas and science segregated him apart from the rest but van Weyden, the gentleman in the first part of the novel; there, Larsen found a new companion to discuss these ideas and, meanwhile, of a new counterpart who failed to appreciate his materialistic philosophy.

When Larsen was first discussing the subject of “ethics” with van Weyden, he said,

‘this is the first time I have heard the word “ethics” in the mouth of a man. [...] ‘At one time in my life,’ he continued, after another pause, ‘I dreamed that I might some day talk with men who used such language, that I might lift myself out of the place in life in which I had been born and hold conversations and mingle with men who talked about just such things as ethics’ [3].

In an economic sense Larsen desired to win the long-term societal struggle of the poor, as discussed earlier, a necessary factor toward frequent conversations regarding ideas instead of the materialistic tendencies of life. Rather unknowingly, Larsen changed the social mobility of the natural setting on *The Ghost*: the environmental isolation that granted the authoritative figure full manipulation, plus the advantage of the utilitarian body. Like many crew members abroad and Schopenhauer himself, all possessed a pessimistic view regarding their lives; Thomas Mugridge believed he will never live a joyous life, and Leach believed he will be murdered by Larsen. Schopenhauer added that the genius has

an excess of cognitive power that it can be temporarily withdrawn from service to his will; accordingly, he takes the time to observe life itself, and strives to grasp the Idea of each thing, not its relations to other things: as a result, he often fails to think about his own course of life, and generally pursues it rather clumsily [14].

Almost all crew members on *The Ghost* signed up while they were drunk, “pursu[ing] life rather clumsily,” as Schopenhauer stated. Could they, at any point, be viewed as Schopenhauerian geniuses, besides Larsen? Despite this single element the rest might be deemed as “geniuses,” it should be noted that fewer resemblances could be found, whether on their aspirations in noble conversations pursuing truth, like Larsen, or the status of being an eternal idea, due to the limited self-affirmation and the narrow egocentric life they placed, a notable divergence from Larsen. Thus the rest presented more traits of a non-genius or ingenuine Schopenhauerian genius varying at dissimilar levels.

If one regards Larsen’s body as an eternal idea, as discussed above, it is conspicuously a natural paradox. Though in the majority of the novel he could be better understood as the superman figure with vast energy and absolute hedonist, in the latter part he revealed his long sickness, evoking traits of the weak, the inferior, and eventually, losing the rivalry according to his own Darwinist philosophy. “Geniuses are rather similar to ordinary people in both their merits and their flaw” [14]. It’s out of no surprise that Larsen, a human still, came to a fall, despite mystery. Once the particles of the “yeast” stopped moving and came to a final halt, the rivalry between moral idealism and brutal materialism ended. “The yeast has grown stale” [3].

The key in the comparison to a Schopenhauerian genius in the application possessed that of a

degree of cognitive power had been granted to him that is far in excess of the amount required for the service of the individual will; and, when liberated, this surplus of cognition now turns into the subject purified of all will, the bright mirror of essence the of the world [14].

Larsen's materialistic philosophy leads to universal suffering, aiding his subjective Will as a hedonist in all its principles. It could be admitted that in concluding the necessity of hedonism whilst facing the existential question, of life itself, the derivation of hedonism and individualism is out of a pessimist attempt, if any, with the will not be purified, as Schopenhauer suggested. Larsen's narrow pursuit of ideas was restricted to a Darwinist outlook, where the insincere pursuit of ideas and the genius was refrained from. He did find an alternative explanation of the human essence: the pleasure of the self and destructive nature to the else.

### 3. Conclusion

Though sharing numerous affinities, Larsen's materialistic philosophy in the Schopenhauerian context, like Nietzsche's superman concept, is controversial and to some, rather notorious. Larsen's egoistic nature of such philosophy and its relation to the virtue of compassion, and meanwhile, the character as a flawed Schopenhauerian genius were examined in this study.

Although Wolf Larsen, London's superman model, shares many resemblances in detail with those of a Schopenhauerian genius, Larsen remains restricted to his subjective will, since the primary purpose of his philosophy is of mass self-indulgence, rather than overcoming the will with an enhanced cognitive power or so. Therefore, Wolf Larsen in *The Sea-Wolf* is to be an inaccurate, or occasional Schopenhauerian genius at best, only at those moments when discussing ideas on philosophy and morals with van Weyden, and times when Larsen becomes a major threat, physically, to any. London is, more or less, conveying the sickened heroism of great individuals, however, failed in his attempt of so, though impressive indeed.

In comparison to his argument on the egoism of the human subject, Schopenhauer regarded animals to be "helplessly given over to external impressions and internal impulses. This is why they have no conscious morality" [15]. Occasionally, could Larsen's characterization be then seen as more of an anthropomorphic figure, rather than an animalistic human individual? Further studies could be attempted not only on Larsen's brutal tendencies or impulses but also in the context of Kant and the Kantian Genius, other interpretations of Larsen's characterization might be established.

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