HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Jack London (1876-1916)

What Life Means to Me

London's conflicting ideals appear in vivid relief in this 1904 autobiographical essay—on one side a Nietzschean worship of individual strength as the agent of progress and on the other side a belief in progress through socialism and class struggle.

London grew up in and around Oakland, California, raiding oyster beds as an "oyster pirate" at age fifteen and in 1893 signing onto the sealer Sophie Sutherland as an able seamen and hunting seals in the Western pacific. Returning to California later that year, he did some newspaper writing, including a prize-winning account of a typhoon off Japan. For a time he roamed the United States as a hobo, and then attended a year of high school and one semester at the University of California at Berkeley, He left college to write professionally, but was unable to sell his work. In 1897, he joined the Klondike gold rush, until scurvy forced him to return home. In 1898 and 1899, he published stories about the Yukon in the Overland Monthly, then truck greater success in 1900 when the Atlantic Monthly published one of his stories and Houghton Mifflin brought out a collection, The Son of the Wolf. From then on, he produced writing of all kinds at an astonishing pace, in all some forty-three volumes.

In 1901, London ran for mayor of Oakland for the Socialist Labor party and began lecturing and propagandizing for socialism. This essay comes out of that effort. He celebrates the toughness of the working class and attacks the hypocrisy and corruption of the ruling class. He also tries to proclaim the oneness of all humanity, but more often in terms of its appetites and baseness than its virtue. Another problem with his approach is that his iconoclasm frequently leads to gross over-simplifications, as in the implicit feminizing of wealth and society and masculinizing of the poor and the workers. Even science and sociology, usually beacons of hope to members of his generation, get knocked down.

London's underlying problem may be that he is too dependent on his personal testimony, for he becomes entangled in the inconsistencies resulting from his celebration of the working class and his celebration, too, of his own rise out of it. Thus he must attack the poor, in giving his motives to become rich, and then emphasize his disillusionment with the rich, to preserve his bond with working men.

In later life, London was less conflicted. His writing provided him with a comfortable income, and in 1907 he set off in his forty-five-foot yacht the Snark to sail around the world. When the trip was cut short by illness, he returned to his magnificent California ranch.

For biographical studies of London, see Joan D. Hedrick, Solitary Comrade: Jack London and his work (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1982) and James Lundquist, Jack London: Adventures, Ideas, and Fiction (New York: Ungar, 1987).

Reading

The Road
http://london.sonoma.edu/Writings/TheRoad/