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THE REPRESENTATION OF THE SEA IN JACK LONDON'S *MARTIN*
EDEN

BA thesis

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Abstract

The present thesis explores different instances in which the protagonist, Martin, in Jack London's *Martin Eden* uses sea related expressions in his everyday life. The main purpose of this thesis is to identify and analyze these nautical expressions as echoes of Martin's sailor identity.

The thesis consists of an introduction, two main chapters and a conclusion. The introduction gives a short overview of the novel and presents the main aspects that are further discussed in the thesis. The introduction also includes the main purpose of the thesis.

The first chapter is a literature review that gives a summary of the previous research done on the novel. The chapter firstly discusses the genre of sea fiction. Then other themes such as social classes and imperialism are discussed. Some biographical parallels to the author's life are also elaborated on, as they can be seen in different elements of the novel.

The second chapter analyzes the protagonist's use of nautical terms for nurturing creativity, self-expression, boosting confidence, visioning the future and conveying disillusionment.

The conclusion provides a summary of the findings.

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Introduction

The sea has been a significant source of literary inspiration for numerous American authors. Sea fiction as a genre of literature is certainly not a new concept and has been a go-to theme for many writers with vastly different plots and objectives that all center on the sea (Rein 2014: 1). A typical sea novel presents distinctive nautical themes throughout the narrative and, according to Rein (2014: 2), “/.../the sea as a symbol is often personified, idealized and connected to yearning.”

Jack London, having been a seasoned sailor his whole life, used sea imagery and symbolism in several of his novels, including the semi-autobiographical sea novel *Martin Eden* (1909). London's deep passion for sailing made some of his publications sea-centered, such as *The Sea-Wolf* and *The Cruise of the Dazzler*. Life on the sea is realistically depicted in the latter, where London shows considerable knowledge on the world and hardships of sailing. In its essence, *Martin Eden* is also considered a sea novel, despite taking place mostly on land (Duneer 2015: 250). The novel deals with a myriad of social issues of the time and addresses the typical struggles of the working class in early twentieth century USA. Class division and poverty are also represented, as well as London's somewhat inconsistent criticism of both individualism and socialism. Previous research on *Martin Eden* and its protagonist has mainly focused on the aforementioned social aspects. Thorough analyses of the novel through the perspective of the sea could not be found while doing research for this thesis. *Martin Eden* provides many topics for analysis, but the present thesis will focus on the main character, Martin, and more specifically, the author's use of the sea imagery through Martin's character.

Jack London's *Martin Eden* begins with Martin, the protagonist, reluctantly having dinner with a bourgeois family, to which he was invited to for saving the family's son, Arthur Morse, in a recent mugging incident. Martin, being a struggling sailor from a working-class

background, feels discomfort and generally out of place. The reader quickly learns that Martin is not skilled at social etiquette nor is he scholarly in any way, but shows his character and potential. Martin feels disheartened by the fact that he is not intellectually equal to the dinner company and that he is unable to follow the conversations surrounding him. After falling deeply in love with the family's daughter Ruth, he goes on an intellectual journey to become a respected and famous author. London depicts the entire story of Martin using sea terminology and demonstrating Martin's unbreakable connection to the sea. Whenever he feels confused, uncomfortable, somber, or even joyful, he finds a suitable sea related expression or situation to compare it to.

The aim of this thesis is to take a closer look at how the sea is represented in the novel *Martin Eden* and to identify different instances in which London uses sea-related imagery. Firstly, the study will give an overview of the genre of sea fiction, *Martin Eden* as a speculated autobiography, the issue of social classes and imperialism. The second part of the thesis focuses on the analysis of the novel. The empirical part of the thesis is not chronological, but the examples are categorized by topic. The main findings are summed up in the conclusion.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW: PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON *MARTIN EDEN*

Introduction

Jack London's *Martin Eden* is a novel with several major themes. This thesis in particular focuses on the sea imagery presented in the novel and tries to interpret these instances as means used by the author to build Martin's character as a famous writer, impassioned lover and seafarer. Four main aspects of the novel are presented in the following literature review: sea fiction genre, autobiographical parallels, the issue of social classes and imperialism.

1.1 Sea fiction genre

When discussing Jack London's *Martin Eden*, most critics and scholars agree that the novel fits into the genre of a typical *Künstlerroman*, where the author reflects on his own writing career and education (Duneer 2015: 251). Sam S. Baskett (1976: 23) states that ".../ Jack London has intended nothing less than a kind of a portrait of the artist." However, Duneer (2015: 250) also notes that *Martin Eden*, despite its narrative mostly taking place on land, undoubtedly also falls into the maritime fiction category as well, due to London's frequent use of sea imagery.

Firstly, it is important to define the term 'sea fiction'. Vickers (2015: 157) states that 'maritime' can mean matters conducted on the sea, but not necessarily. He elaborates that it can also describe people or places near the sea that share common cultural features (Vickers 2015: 157). Raban (1993: 30) notes that in modernist literature, the sea ".../figures as a realm of escape and renewal." Bender believes that the main aspect of an American sea novel is essentially the romantic attitude toward the sea (Bender 1984: 230). He further stresses that a typical American sea novel possesses "the ideals of democracy, individual freedom and self-reliance" (Bender 1984: 232). These features can also be seen in London's novel. According to

Bender (1984: 234), many well-known American sea novel authors have been sailors themselves or spent a considerable time on the sea, for example Hemingway and Melville, the author of the famous sea novel *Moby Dick*. Duneer (2015: 258) notes that two literary influences of London - Richard Henry Dana and Robert Lewis Stevenson – both went on the sea to cure their poor health. Bender stresses that in any attempt to understand American sea literature, one must consider the individuals personal experiences with the sea, “/.../the inward experiences of solitary individuals as they encounter the sea” (Bender 1984: 230). As was mentioned in the introduction, London also had a close connection to sea.

1.2 Speculations on autobiography

Jack London often turned to his own experiences when collecting material for fiction, and there have been several speculations on the autobiographical instances in *Martin Eden*. London was a sailor and composed the novel while sailing with his wife on the Pacific, on his small ketch *Snark* (Duneer 2015: 265). In his non-fiction *Cruise of the Snark*, London (2000: 35-36) explains how nobody in his crew quite knew how to navigate, nor did he, so he had no choice but to quickly learn it himself. He explains: “The poison of power was working in me. I was not as other men – most other men; I knew what they did not know /.../” (London 2000: 37). This type of individualist stance is very similar to Martin’s. Furthermore, in his autobiographical novel *John Barleycorn*, London briefly addresses the criticism that the success-story of Martin Eden was unconvincing, and argues that Martin’s achievements are very plausible, as he was Martin Eden (London 2001: 1059). Kim (2001: 11) brings attention to Martin Eden’s initials ‘ME’ which may prove to be another autobiographical element. Poole (1990: 69) is also convinced of *Martin Eden* being an autobiography and notes that London merely “pretends to be writing fiction.”

Not all scholars agree that *Martin Eden* is autobiographical. Williams (2014: 16) argues that while the figure of the author is important in literary analysis, “/.../we will never be able to retrieve a pure London presence from the creation of Martin Eden.” That is, we can say that London used his experiences but *Martin Eden* is fiction, not autobiography. According to Watson (1981: 400) London had written down notes after his trip to Klondike that foreshadow the narrative of *Martin Eden*. London describes the destruction of love, referring to his ill-fated first marriage, as well as his disappointment in the materialistic society – all of the aspects appear in *Martin Eden*. Baskett (1976: 35) claims *Martin Eden* to be London’s “poem of the mind.” He explains that London tries to grasp the romantic vision until ultimately accepting the “modern wasteland” (Baskett 1976: 36). Baskett (1976: 36) states that *Martin Eden* depicts London’s chaotic artistic search and Williams (2014: 22) also emphasizes London’s constant search for the answers to existential questions, which is incorporated into the character of Martin Eden. Baskett (1974: 24) suggests that *Martin Eden* was London’s search of appraisal for himself as an artist. Duneer (2015: 250) notes that “the sea is as integral to Martin’s character as it is for London’s self-identity.”

Jack London and Martin Eden had a similar life journey, starting from working class and rising to wealth. Christopher (2002: 83) notes: “The novel chronicles Martin’s rise, which parallels London’s own, out of the working class and into the highest reaches of literary and monetary success.” Campbell Reesman (2010: 32) also highlights Jack London’s shift between social classes and stresses how difficult it was for London to accept the new bourgeois class identity (Campbell Reesman 2010: 32).

London began writing the novel at the age of thirty-one, at the peak of his success. Petro states that Jack London, while sailing on the *Snark*, set off to the South Pacific to “retrace his lost youth” (Petro 2012: 194). This is similar to Martin Eden, who decided to go on the sea as his last attempt to find Paradise again (*ME*: 927).

1.3 The issue of social classes

The issue of social class is discussed thoroughly by Renny Christopher in her essay on American working-class literature. The entire novel highlights the vast differences between the working class and the middle class, and Martin experienced both sides simultaneously, resulting in a split identity (Christopher 2002: 86). According to Christopher “/.../the unhappy upward mobility genre might well be named ‘Martin Eden stories’” (2002: 82). The American working-class literature subgenre “narratives of unhappy upward mobility” is coined by Christopher, and it describes the paradigm of the ultimately disappointing climb from the working class to the middle class (Christopher 2002: 80), as seen in *Martin Eden*.

London has emphasized class differences in *Martin Eden* mostly with the interactions between Martin and Ruth. Christopher uses Ruth Morse, Martin’s love interest, as an example of bourgeois culture (2002: 84). Christopher also emphasizes Martin’s strength that comes from his working-class background and states that this same strength and willingness to fight helped him push through into middle-class society (Christopher 2002: 84). Christopher (2002: 84) further notes that London does not belittle or ridicule Martin and any other working-class characters in the novel, and rather stereotypes the middle class instead, which is an unusual literary pattern. Schwebel (2009: 323) notes that London’s contemporaries focused more on the themes and characters associated with the middle and upper class, and “avoided the class that didn’t purchase books” (Schwebel 2009: 323). Kim (2001: 2) explains that Martin was defined by the middle-class as somebody with a savage nature and unrestrained masculinity, and “untouched by the feminizing influence of the middle-class culture.” Kim (2001: 1) highlighted how London intended *Martin Eden* to be a critique of the bourgeoisie and everything it stands for, which is depicted by Martin’s fading admiration and negative attitude towards the bourgeoisie in the end of the novel.

Christopher (2002: 87) believes that by achieving great wealth and fame, Martin lost his biggest incentive in life – struggle, which left him without any meaning and any sense of himself. Christopher adds: “the middle class values him for his fame; his former working-class chums value him for a self he no longer feels himself to be” (2002: 88). Kim (2001: 2) notes that a number of critics consider *Martin Eden* to be London’s response to the rags-to-riches myth perpetuated by the popular Horatio Alger stories of the time. Christopher (2002: 82) adds that Jack London is the anti-Horatio Alger, and that *Martin Eden* depicts the myth of individual success through hard work.

1.4 Imperialism

Kim (2001: 2) notes that only a few critics have looked at *Martin Eden* from the perspective of imperialism. Kim (2001: 5) discusses how it is certainly a novel on imperialist themes for several reasons, for example, it regularly mentions exotic places such as Hawaii and Tahiti – colonized areas at the time of the narrative. In addition, the novel was written during London’s travels on the South Pacific in 1908-1909, which was the around the time of imperialist ventures that resulted in the Western exploitation in the region (Kim 2001: 2).

When Martin is comparing the working-class women from exotic lands to the “pure and white” bourgeois women, Kim (2001: 4) believes that “Ruth’s whiteness comes to be defined against racialized colonial subjects, illustrating how Martin’s understanding of women and class difference is defined by the discourse of imperialism.” It is suggested that class difference is analogous to racial difference with race and class represented in the terms set forth by imperialism - the “civilized” and the “savage” (Kim 2001: 2). Kim explains further that Martin tirelessly pursuing Ruth and Ruth consistently denying her own feelings can be compared to a primitive battle of conquest and domination, which is another imperialist notion (Kim 2001: 7).

According to Kim (2001: 10), “Ruth’s proprietary sense” over Martin as well as her desire to tame him again illustrates imperialist discourse in describing their relationship.

1.5 Discussion

As *Martin Eden* is often used as an example of individualist literature (Deane 1968: 19), many critics focus mostly on the individualist aspect of the novel, thus other elements, such as sea imagery and the issue of class, have not got much attention from the critics. The literature review found connections between the sea fiction genre and the novel. It also discussed the issue of the social classes depicted in *Martin Eden* and how they influenced the protagonist. As Jack London and Martin Eden shared many similarities, looking into the autobiographical element of the novel also seemed pertinent, and it became evident that several parallels could be drawn between these two. In the article “Crafting the Sea: Romance and Realism in Jack London’s *Martin Eden*”, Duneer has taken a deeper look into the sea terminology in the novel. However, her analysis does not link the descriptions of the sea to the London’s development of Martin’s psychology. This is what the present thesis sets out to do. The following empirical study will approach the novel from the sea perspective to find how Martin’s sailor identity acts as a means of self-expression, among other things.

2. THE SEA REPRESENTED IN *MARTIN EDEN*

Introduction

In the empirical part of this thesis, some sea-related elements of the novel are analyzed. Since Martin Eden was a lifelong sailor, there are many instances in the novel in which sea imagery is used, although most of the action takes place on land. The thesis aims to find out how these images help to highlight significant moments in Martin's life.

The novel begins with Martin deciding to educate himself and devote many hours of the day for reading. His mind and spirit are overwhelmed by knowledge and his love for Ruth, which both ultimately fail him. During Martin's intellectual journey, his creative side is activated by sea imagery. His sailor identity and sea knowledge give him confidence at somber occasions and help him express his feelings and thoughts more accurately. Towards the end of the novel, Martin uses sea imagery for depicting future visions and his disillusionment about life. His abrupt suicide on the Pacific shows his unbreakable connection to the sea. All these instances are further analyzed below.

2.1 Sea and creativity

In the first chapter of the novel, it is immediately clear that while Martin is not educated in the traditional sense, he recognizes beauty effortlessly and is highly responsive to art. He knows what is considered beautiful, especially when it is somehow related to the sea. For example, when Martin observes an oil painting while visiting a wealthy acquaintance, he sees the sailing boat in the stormy seas which catches his attention straight away. "There was beauty, and it drew him irresistibly" (*ME*: 558). Martin is stepping back and forth and is mesmerized that with the small distance change: "the beauty faded out of the canvas" (*ME*: 558). If the painting had depicted anything other than the sea, it is unlikely that Martin would have stopped

to take a deeper glance. The reader can see how Martin's mind is stimulated and keeps pondering over the "trick picture". While admiring the painting, he forgets all the tension in the air and his timid movements from minutes before. Because of the sea image, Martin, for a brief moment, feels at ease and perhaps even hopeful that maybe the upcoming evening will not be as frightening as he initially thought, since the hosts have this lovely art in their house.

During Martin's first encounter with his love interest, Ruth, they discuss the scars on Martin's face, and he goes on to explain the story behind them. He illustrates in detail how on a starry night at Salina Cruz, an angry Mexican attacked him with a knife. He becomes aware that his numerous sea voyages and seaman life have been extraordinary. While reminiscing about that fateful night in Mexico, Martin concludes that it would look impressive on a painting. He imagines the possible scenery:

The white beach, the stars, and the lights of the sugar steamers would look great, he thought, and midway of the sand the dark group of figures that surrounded the fighters. The knife occupied a place in the picture, he decided, and would show well, with a sort of gleam, in the light of the stars. (*ME*: 562).

This memory activates the creative part of his mind. He has never studied art and has no prior experience with it, but because of his adventures on the sea, he is able to turn that to his advantage and can see certain things in a different light. Kim (2001: 3) notes: "Martin's powerful creative imagination erupts through the opening chapters of the novel, long before he is aware of his own talent."

After eight months of sailing on the South Seas, reading Shakespeare and earning some money, Martin returns to San Francisco. He is eager to see Ruth again and cannot wait to share the beauty of the sea with her. After having read much poetry and prose on the schooner, Martin has an epiphany and realizes that he wishes to write everything down: "And then, in splendor and glory, came the great idea. He would write. He could be one of the eyes through which the world saw, one of the ears through which it heard, one of the hearts through which he felt." (*ME*: 625)

He now feels confident enough to express his thoughts, his experiences on his voyages and what he appreciates about the sea articulately. Again, it is the sea that makes him creative, and more importantly, makes him want to be creative. In this instance, the reader can see that it was the sea that makes Martin want to start writing in the first place. Although the novel mostly focuses on the idea that Martin goes through all this intellectual journey to impress Ruth, it is important to note that it was first the beauty of the sea that makes him want to start publishing texts. Later on, when Martin is sending his manuscripts to magazines almost daily, his own personal favorite short stories are all related to the sea – “Sea Lyrics,” “Pearl-diving,” “The Sea as a Career”, to name a few.

When Martin is conversing with Professor Caldwell, he is reminded of a song about trade winds and realizes how the professor is similar to them. The professor and Martin are discussing the existential questions of the universe and Martin admires how Caldwell is opening his fragile side. Martin’s mind connects Caldwell’s personality to the “Song of the Trade Wind” and its lyrics:

“I am strongest at noon,
But under the moon
I stiffen the bunt of the sail.” (*ME*: 770)

Martin believes Caldwell is just like the trade wind of the Northeast Trade, which is always strong, steady and frigid. He has the feeling that the professor does not always speak his mind, similarly to the trade winds that never blow their strongest, although they have the capacity. The song lyrics activate Martin’s brain, and for the first time, he realizes this himself as well. “Whatever occurred in the instant present, Martin’s mind immediately presented associated antithesis or similitude which ordinarily expressed themselves in vision” (*ME*: 770). What Martin does not yet realize is that these visions seem to be activated only if the sea is somehow involved. Out of all the songs he knows, it is this sea themed song that activates his creativity.

His consciousness trails to the trade winds he has experienced many times before, blowing the thick clouds on the purple sea and he suddenly feels a rush of creativity (*ME*: 770).

2.2 Sailor identity and confidence

At the beginning of the novel, Martin is painfully aware of belonging to the struggling working class. His parents have passed away years ago, and he has had to take care of himself for as long as he can remember. Martin has not brushed his teeth or ironed his pants. He realizes how incorrectly he spoke, but for a long time it was the only way he knew how to speak. While interacting with the Morse family, he feels embarrassed for his rugged appearance and language, but not for his sailor background. He loves sailing, and will always be fascinated by it, no matter where he is, or who he may become. For example, when Martin and Ruth's relationship is evolving, they were having dinner with Ruth's parents one night, and although Martin is initially feeling a little unsure of himself, he immediately gets back on track when they start discussing the sea as a career. That is the one topic Martin knows well and, after having recently educated himself, can express himself clearly, using sophisticated vocabulary.

One late night, as Martin is walking home from Ruth's place, he sees a group of young men, presumably university students. Martin has been in rather gloomy frame of mind that evening, because he feels intellectually unequal to Ruth and senses a huge gap in knowledge between them two. Thus, seeing college boys saddens Martin even more, but he quickly picks himself up and concludes that there are useful skills that he possesses, which they do not. He thinks:

What they had done, he could do. They had been studying about life from the books while he had been busy living life. His brain was just as full of knowledge as theirs, though it was a different kind of knowledge. How many of them could tie a lanyard knot, or take a wheel or a lookout? (*ME*: 580)

He likes the thought that he has lived a remarkable life, has encountered danger and hardships firsthand. All his past failures have given him strength and experience. This is something you

cannot learn from books and that realization gives him confidence to keep seeing Ruth and later to become an autodidact.

One afternoon, as Ruth is having a severe headache, Martin starts gently massaging her head with special movements that he had learned from the Japanese, and the Hawaiians. Martin explains that it is called *lomi-lomi* and can cure almost everything that drugs cannot (*ME*: 712). Soon after, Ruth falls into a deep sleep and afterwards calls Martin to thank him. The headache was gone completely. Again, Martin could assure himself that the skills and experience he had gained on the sea are as important as book-knowledge, just a different kind of knowledge. Instead of merely reading about various cultures and traditions, he experienced them firsthand. Step by step, Martin starts to feel equal to Ruth and believes he is worthy of her.

It has been established that before discovering books and literature, Martin was completely uneducated. He knows that, and it bothers him a great deal. But when analyzing his life as a whole, from beginning to end, it can be concluded that his initial knowledge of the world, or lack thereof, is the only thing he feels self-conscious about. He always embraces his sailor identity, his nautical skills, and his appreciation of beauty and art. In fact, as he sometimes reminisces about the sea, he will get an immediate confidence boost. When talking to Ruth about his voyage to the Hawaiian Islands, he remembers a beautiful and noble girl suffering from leprosy. Ruth becomes jealous but apologizes for feeling this way. She calls people from Martin's past ghosts and promises to not react this way in the future, (*ME*: 762-764). It seems that for Martin, having had short-term companions, or ghosts, at the sea, functions as a momentary assurance that he is desirable.

Although Martin's first manuscripts are mostly rejected, he does not lose faith in himself. He believes in his future fame and his abilities as a writer. When writing the short story "Overdue" about the sea, he feels confident this will be the turning point of his career. Martin

“compared the tale, as yet unwritten, with the tales of the sea-writers, and he felt it to be immeasurably superior” (*ME*: 845). Because his narrative is about the sea, something he knows so much about, he is confident in its success. The sea will not fail him.

2.3 Self-expression

Before Martin educates himself, he struggles to find the right words to voice his feelings and ideas. In order to do so, he would often compare the current situation to a similar situation happening at sea. For example, when talking to Ruth about a famous English author Swinburne, he realizes how inadequate his speech is and worries about the poor image he is leaving Ruth. He cannot express his feelings but compares it to being a sailor, on a strange ship sailing at night in foreign waters. When expressing his concern of not being able to convey his opinions concisely, he reveals: “I’m like a navigator adrift on a strange sea without chart or compass” (*ME*: 566). Before becoming an autodidact, Martin expresses himself through sea imagery. When Martin has finally reached the level of cultivation he is satisfied with, he still sometimes, in his mind, opts for a nautical expression, because for him it is the most accurate depiction. For example, while having one of the many dinners at the Morse’s household, Martin is tired and irritable. He glances at Ruth for comfort and compares his distressed feeling to “/.../the same manner that a passenger, with sudden panic thought of possible shipwreck, will strive to locate the life-preservers” (*ME*: 846). At that instance, he sees Ruth as his lifejacket.

After having consumed literature and dictionaries, he finds it easier to express himself. He can convey emotions and ideas much better, and his grammar is nearly perfect, according to Professor Hilton. Martin possesses practical knowledge, but lacks the most basic knowledge about the world, so Ruth’s pushes him to enter night school, much to his dismay. Martin attempts to explain her how he actually learns best by himself, in the library:

.../ I'll explore a whole lot more quickly by myself. The speed of a fleet, you know, is the speed of the slowest ship, and the speed of the teachers is affected the same way. They can't go any faster than the ruck of their scholars, and I can set a faster pace for myself than they set for a whole schoolroom. (*ME*: 636-637)

Martin opts for a nautical explanation to make sure his thought is presented as coherently as possible. The sea is a tool he uses to express his thoughts accurately. Sometimes he will simply phrase something using sea terminology only for himself, to gain perspective. For example, when arguing with Ruth about the significance of the English philosopher Herbert Spencer, he concludes in his mind that: ".../to give up Spencer would be equivalent to a navigator throwing the compass and chronometer overboard" (*ME*: 656). Martin is fascinated with Spencer's ideas and his convincing explanation of things. The philosopher is even able to shake Martin's strong individualist viewpoint, to the point of comparing his significance to a compass. As compasses are used for navigation, one can conclude that Martin uses Spencer's ideas for a sense of direction and relies on them.

Ruth gives Martin two years to become a successful writer. If he does not succeed, they will not get married. After the first year has passed, Martin is still not a published writer, and Ruth is becoming impatient. Martin tries to explain to her his determination and faith. He notes how he has not slept properly for months and is reminded of Longfellow's lines:

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. (*ME*: 800)

For Martin, this is the most concise way to explain how he feels about the situation. He compares himself to the sea, and how quickly it all can change, for the better or worse. Martin sees himself like the sea – deep, and able to surprise you at any moment with its strength and heavy currents. Bender (1984: 230) notes that in understanding the core elements of a sea fiction, one must realize the raw power of the sea. In Martin's case, he has the similar power in him and is waiting for his breakthrough to surface. Although the raw power of the sea is not

depicted in the novel, the reader can see the rough and unrevealed power in Martin, who, in his mind, is always connected to the sea and channeling its strength.

2.3.1 Describing Ruth

Martin is immediately very fond of Ruth and would often admire her beauty. All the women whom Martin had previously courted tended to be more rough. As Martin spends more time with Ruth, he starts to notice the difference more and more. Since the very first meeting, he thinks of Ruth's beauty as divine and ethereal. He compares her to the women he has met on his voyages on the South-Sea-Island:

.../ by full-bodied South-Sea-Island women, flower-crowned and brown-skinned. All these were blotted out by a grotesque and terrible nightmare brood – frowsy, shuffling creatures from the pavements of Whitechapel, gin-bloated hags of the stews, and the vast hell's following of harpies, vile-mouthed and filthy, that under the guise of monstrous female form prey upon sailors, the scrapings of the ports, the scum and slime of the human pit. (ME: 561)

After spending some more time with Ruth and hearing her mesmerizing soprano singing voice, Martin's mind compares it to the weak and unpleasant voices of the women of the seaport towns, whose voices have been ruined by excessive alcohol consumption. Since Ruth is Martin's first encounter with a bourgeois woman, the difference between her and the other women is shocking. Martin's racial comparison of the women is imperialist in a sense that the women of the South Seas are depicted as savage, while Ruth with her purity and intelligence is seen as civilized.

As Martin's present and future are inevitably intertwined with the sea, it can be expected that he would incorporate his potential life partner into it as well. When imagining life with Ruth, his mind creates a loving image of Martin and Ruth drifting on the sea, her in his lap, with her golden hair blowing in his face. Martin does not describe Ruth's hair as simply beautiful, but imagines it in a setting that he finds most comforting and beautiful – on the sea.

2.3.2 Russell Brissenden's death

Martin admires and respects his only close friend Russell Brissenden. Brissenden, or Briss is intelligent and constantly challenges Martin's thought-process. He is also a talented writer and Martin loves his poems. Brissenden repeatedly urges Martin to set his priorities straight, stop pursuing Ruth and return to the sea: "Leave fame and coin alone, sign away on a ship tomorrow, and go back to your sea" (*ME*: 814). It is telling that he chooses to emphasize the sea's importance to Martin by saying *your* sea. He can see through Martin's naïve perspective on fame and love. As the novel progresses, the reader soon realizes that, in a sense, Brissenden is right all along, and the sea has always been and will always be the true place to be for Martin.

Russell Brissenden committed suicide and while initially it seems that Martin is not affected by it, one evening he suddenly goes numb and stares into the emptiness, until he starts seeing a detailed vision set in Tahiti: there is a young man canoeing in the ocean, he happily joins him and, under the setting sun, they paddle together to the coral beach. The vision fades and it becomes clear to Martin that he wishes to visit Tahiti again. It is now clear how much Brissenden's death means to Martin, and this happy image of Tahiti helps him cope with the loss. It is not Ruth, or fame and fortune that helps him through the mourning process, but a happy vision on the sea. According to Kim (2001: 14), although the exotic vision faded, it "held out the promise of renewal and revitalization." Mentioning Tahiti is another imperialist aspect as it was colonized by the French around the time of the narrative. As time goes on, Martin is constantly reminded of Brissenden's outlook on shallow magazines, which then reminds him of the Tahiti vision: "The South Seas were calling, and he knew that sooner or later he would answer the call" (*ME*: 876).

2.4 Future visions

When Martin is still in the process of educating himself and has not achieved wealth and fame, while sailing with Ruth he starts daydreaming. For a short moment, Martin imagines how it would feel to be rich and famous, and the first thing that comes to mind was not Ruth but owning a steam yacht. The sea always comes first to Martin, although he keeps denying it and believes that the most important thing in his life is Ruth.

Towards the end of the novel, Martin is doing very well financially, and starts imagining his future. He has a lot of money but does not quite know what to do with it. Immediately his mind travels to the sea, and he thinks about a bay in the Marquesas that he could buy. He continues with the idea of buying a large, coppered schooner and a grass house in Tahiti. Throughout the novel Martin expresses his undying love for Ruth, and yet after Ruth leaves him, it seems that Ruth has left Martin's mind as well, and he does not include her in his future visions.

Before setting off to the sea, unknowingly for the last time, Martin tries to imagine himself in a pleasant setting. He thinks about the grass house again, catching sharks and *bonitas* in Tahiti, but the vision does not bring much excitement to him anymore. This shows the extent of his disappointment and desperation. He realizes this himself as well and flirts with the thought of his upcoming death. If the sea cannot make him happy, nothing can.

2.5 Disillusionment

Martin did not expect fame and fortune to be this disappointing. He feels lonely and is confused and dissatisfied with his state of mind. He has come to all this money and yet sees no meaning to it. He feels lost: "Money had no meaning to him now except what it could immediately buy. He was chartless and rudderless, and he had no port to make, while drifting

involved the least living, and it was living that hurt” (*ME*: 873-874). Christopher (2002: 87) notes how the lack of struggle has left Martin with nothing. Martin explains how he has no direction and is foreshadowing his suicide.

Martin is extremely bitter with the society for only believing he is worth something after becoming famous. He cannot understand why his “work performed” defines him and why he never got the same treatment when he was a sailor, prior to fame. In the eyes of others, why was he seen as less when he was a seafarer? He dislikes the current version of himself and realizes he felt more connected to himself when he was a simple sailor:

He drove along the path of relentless logic to the conclusion that he was nobody, nothing. Mart Eden, the hoodlum, and Mart Eden, the sailor, had been real, had been he; but Martin Eden! The famous writer, was a vapor that had arisen in the mob-mind and by the mob-mind had been thrust into the corporeal being of Mart Eden, the hoodlum and sailor. But it couldn't fool him (*ME*: 908).

The sea is calling for him, and he is wondering if he should make the “grass-walled castle and the white, coppered schooner” idea come true. He is not particularly eager to set off to the sea, but it is his safe space, and he has run out of ideas. He knows that he was never unhappy on the sea. Bender (1984: 232) notes that being at sea can be frightening, but also liberating. Martin has hit a wall, and the sea is his escape, so he books a cruise to Tahiti to try to fix his “think-machine” (*ME*: 909), as his close friend Lizzie Connolly calls it.

Cruising on the ocean liner *Mariposa*, Martin observes the people around him. He realizes he is no longer part of the working class but feels no connection the bourgeoisie either. He has experienced both sides of these lives, having worked on cruise ships, toiling in the coal-hold. He would think back at those days and remember seeing the first-class passengers, in their clean white shirts, soaking in the sun, seemingly in paradise. He concludes that he was much happier then, but did not realize it at the time:

Well, here he was, the great man on board, in the midmost center of it, sitting at the captain's right hand, and yet vainly harking back to fore-castle and stoke-hole in quest of the Paradise he had lost. He had found no new one, and now he could not find the old one (*ME*: 927).

Christopher (2002: 80) suggests that moving up from the working class to the middle class “/.../produces alienation, despair and impulses to suicide”. He adds that Martin found the middle class to be “hollow, empty and devoid of meaning/.../” (Christopher 2002: 82).

2.5.1 Suicide

Before setting off to Tahiti, Martin visits the doctor for a regular physical examination. He hopes to find a reason for his ill feeling, but his condition is perfect. On the cruise, Martin is reading Swinburne out loud and in one of his poems finally discovers the cure to his illness:

From too much love of living
From hope and fear set free,
We thank with brief thanksgiving
Whatever gods may be
That no life lives forever;
That dead men rise up never;
That even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea. (*ME*: 929)

Like the river in the poem, Martin, seeking comfort and safety, also ends up on the sea. It is human nature to find solace in familiar things and places, and the sea is home for Martin. “He had been drifting that way all the time, and now Swinburne showed him that it was the happy way out” (*ME*: 929). Towards the end of the novel, London repeatedly chooses to describe Martin’s disillusioned state as ‘drifting’ – he had no direction, no compass, no port waiting for him, thus dying is the only thing that would take the pain of purposeless life away, and the sea is the perfect place to do it. Without thinking twice, he goes out the port-hole feet first and jumps to the black ocean. He is not scared because the ocean is familiar to him and if anything, he finally feels at ease. He drowns himself by swimming as deep as he can in one breath. According to Duneer (2015: 269), by swimming deeper and deeper, Martin demonstrates his most important quest – to reach beneath the surface and find all the answers. Right before his last moments, he sees a vision of a lighthouse inside his brain. It is white and flashing brightly. The lighthouse depicts the end of Martin’s journey. It acts as a final confirmation to Martin that

he is on his way to home port, which he has been searching for all along, and that his aimless drifting is finally over.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis we saw how Jack London uses nautical expressions in creating his protagonist Martin Eden in *Martin Eden*. Martin is portrayed as a sailor with a working-class background, who opts for a sea related comparison during significant moments of his life. The literature review gives an overview of the previous research done of the novel: the notions of class, characteristics of sea fiction and the presence of imperialist traits in the novel. Many scholars have argued that *Martin Eden* is autobiographical or, at least, that the novel has clear parallels with the life of Jack London. Although Jack London has been analyzed as an author of sea fiction, there have not been many studies that look into how sea is used in *Martin Eden*, a novel that mostly takes place on land, not on sea. The aim of this thesis was to explore during which instances and how exactly does London choose to use a sea related expression in writing about Martin and to analyze his reasons behind it.

The sea was used in different moments of Martin's life, to convey different emotions and for several purposes. First of all, it is revealed that Martin's creative side was activated when the subject was somehow connected to the sea. His education was minimal, and he did not have even the basic book knowledge of the world, but he was highly responsive to art, and the sea seemed to act as a trigger for his bursts of imagination. Moments such as admiring a painting of the sea, imagining his sea voyages on a painting or his first manuscripts about his adventures on the sea all shared a common feature, the sea.

Martin's extraordinary experiences on the sea and general sailor knowledge are shown to give him confidence at moments when he needed it the most, for example when he felt insecure because of his class background. When he was feeling disheartened about his lack of manners and proper language, London made Martin focus on his nautical skills to convince

himself of his true worth. Martin's seafarer identity functioned a safe mindscape for him, when necessary.

London also chose to use sea related expressions when describing Martin's love interest, Ruth. Before Martin was educated enough to use proper vocabulary, he resorted to sea related comparisons to describe her beauty. Afterwards, when Martin was capable of expressing himself articulately, he is still sometimes made to use nautical terminology as it was the most accurate way to convey his thoughts. Moreover, when Martin was imagining his future with Ruth, his mental image depicted Ruth on a sailing boat. This demonstrated how London saw Martin's unbreakable bond to the sea as the source of Martin's future visions. The loss of this future is, in turn, also portrayed with nautical terms, as being a drifting ship at night, without a compass and direction. London also uses Martin's decision to commit suicide by drowning in the ocean to cement his connection to the sea. It seemed the only logical way to go and his last attempt at finding peace in his soul, after everything else had failed him.

The above analysis shows that the sea is a central theme of the novel and of the protagonist. London uses sea imagery extensively all through the novel, especially in portraying his protagonist, Martin Eden. Martin's sailor identity has not got much academic attention, but the analysis above shows that London uses it to convey other central topics of the novel, such as individualism, class and even imperialism. As the novel was originally published over a century ago, I believe that new comprehensive research could be done on *Martin Eden* through a fresh perspective. One of the topics that could be further studied is the illusion of fame and the pursuit of the 'American Dream'.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL

ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Merilin Kukk

The Representation of the Sea in Jack London's *Martin Eden*

Mere kujutamine Jack Londoni romaanis *Martin Eden*

Bakalaureusetöö

2021

Lehekülgede arv: 29

Annotatsioon:

Käesoleva bakalaureusetöö eesmärk on analüüsida, kuidas on merd kujutatud Jack Londoni romaanis *Martin Eden* läbi nime tegelase Martin Edeni. Töö koosneb neljast osast: sissejuhatusest, kahest peatükist ja kokkuvõttest.

Sissejuhatus annab ülevaate teosest ning sõnastab töö eesmärgid ja uurimisküsimused. Esimene peatükk on kirjanduse ülevaade. See käsitleb Londoni romaani kuuluvust mereromaani žanrisse ning teoses esinevaid peamisi teemasid, milleks on sotsiaalsed klassid ja imperialism, samuti romaani autobiograafiline aspekt. Teine peatükk, romaani analüüs, on jagatud viide alapeatükki, mis on üles ehitatud erinevatele hetkedele Martini elus, pöörates tähelepanu tema merekujundite kasutusele. Töö tulemusena selgus, et Martin kasutab merega seonduvaid väljendeid peamiselt enesekindluse saavutamiseks, loomingulisuse aktiveerimiseks, eneseväljenduseks, tuleviku kujutamiseks ning turvatunde tekitamiseks.

Märksõnad: Jack London, Ameerika kirjandus, mereromaan, autobiograafia, imperialism, sotsiaalsed klassid

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