

Writing Factory or Art: The Condition of a Writer in Jack London's *Martin Eden*

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Abstract

Jack London's autobiographical novel *Martin Eden* presents two views on writing. One is the view of a writer as a hardworking laborer in the factory of text production. That view may have been inspired by London's own experiences of working in a laundromat and other factories, which he describes in *Martin Eden*. The second view is that of the writer as an artist, interested in the higher world of Love and Beauty. This view is represented by the upper-class woman, Ruth, in the novel, whom Martin loves. Martin achieves success as a laborer in the "writing factory," which in return gives him access to the upper-class world of Love and Beauty and acceptance by Ruth, his inspiration to live and create. However, he starts viewing the "writing factory," which has been providing him with the financial means and prestige of a writer as incompatible with the real nature of the writer as an artist. The attempt to resolve this dilemma makes him "go to sea" and drown himself, seeing the impossibility of resolving it.

Keywords: artist, class, Jack London, laborer, *Martin Eden*

I. Introduction

As you walk in Oakland, there are many places where Jack London has been. It is located in the Bay Area, a working-class town compared to San Francisco, even today, in 2024. San Francisco is more upper-class, with many artists living there. This contrast between the upper-class artistic San Francisco and the working-class Oakland is portrayed in London's autobiographical novel *Martin Eden*. The novel traces Martin's rise from a working-class laborer to a successful writer. He gains

entry into the upper-class world of Love and Beauty, represented by the upper-class woman, Ruth. In this paper, I will discuss how Martin and London approach writing as both a “writing factory” activity and art, and how this has created a major dilemma in the novel, which has led to Martin’s suicide at the end.

II. Writing as that of a text factory worker

Martin Eden, resembles Jack London in his approaches to writing as a text factory worker. The first characteristic of this approach is writing for money, to make a living and afford whatever one wishes. The second one is that the process of writing is similar to the heavy labor of a factory worker.

At the beginning of chapter six, Martin does not have money to buy books, so he makes everybody become a member of the library so they could borrow books for him, as borrowing was limited. Buying books costs money, so he tries to avoid spending money by borrowing books from the library. That incites him to think about cost efficiency. A laborer must always think about profit from expenses, making money is a factory worker’s concern, among other social groups, not that of a true artist’s.

He spent long hours in the Oakland and Berkeley libraries, and made out application blanks for membership for himself, his sisters Gertrude and Marian, and Jim, the latter’s consent being obtained at the expense of several glasses of beer. With four cards permitting him to draw books, he burned the gas late in the servant’s room, and was charged fifty cents a week for it by Mr. Higginbotham. (79-80)

To write sentences, one first has to know how correct sentences are made and observe the way they are written. Martin Eden learned about writing from the many books he borrowed from the Oakland Library under various names.

He keeps calculating how much he can earn by writing. Let us look:

When he had copied the article a second time and rolled it up carefully, he read in a newspaper an item on hints to beginners, and discovered the iron law

that manuscripts should never be rolled and that they should be written on one side of the paper. He had violated the law on both counts. Also, he learned from the item that first-class papers paid a minimum of ten dollars a column. So, while he copied the manuscript a third time, he consoled himself by multiplying ten columns by ten dollars. The product was always the same, one hundred dollars, and he decided that that was better than seafaring. If it hadn't been for his blunders, he would have finished the article in three days. One hundred dollars in three days! It would have taken him three months and longer on the sea to earn a similar amount. A man was a fool to go to sea when he could write, he concluded, though the money in itself meant nothing to him. Its value was in the liberty it would get him, the presentable garments it would buy him, all of which would bring him nearer, swiftly nearer, to the slender pale girl who had turned his life back upon itself and given him inspiration. (116-117)

In this scene, Martin realizes that writing "was better than seafaring." He decides to make money more efficiently. He discovers that some jobs require much more effort to make money than other jobs. Finally, he concludes that "[a] man was a fool to go to sea when he could write." He realizes that writing brings more money. He starts writing and making money. He hopes that way he can become closer to Ruth. He can be close to her. She would give him more inspiration to write and it would seem he become a perfect circle.

At the end of chapter nine, the story goes forward. Martin has made some money, which he gives to his family.

On Friday night he finished the serial, twenty-one thousand words long. At two cents a word, he calculated, that would bring him four hundred and twenty dollars. Not a bad week's work. It was more money than he had ever possessed at one time. He did not know how he could spend it all. He had tapped a gold mine. Where this came from he could always get more. He planned to buy some more clothes, to subscribe to many magazines, and to buy dozens of reference books that at present he was compelled to go to the library reference books that at present he was compelled to go to the library to consult. And still there was a large portion of the four hundred and twenty

dollars unspent. This worried him until the thought came to him of hiring a servant for Gertrude and of buying a bicycle for Marian. (119)

In this part, Martin can actually buy reference books and a bicycle for his little sister. In the same chapter, he discusses his financial progress. He is going to be successful. However, he can make some money in the beginning but not enough to live only as a writer. So, he works at the laundromat. Ironically, he must work for the upper-class people because mostly the rich people need fancy starched outfits. On a hot California night, he works at the oppressive laundromat.

“Way behind,” he said. “Got to work after supper.” And after supper they worked until ten o’clock, under the blazing electric lights, until the last piece of underclothing was ironed and folded away in the distributing room. It was a hot California night, and though the windows were thrown wide, the room, with its red-hot ironing-stove, was a furnace. Martin and Joe, down to undershirts, bare armed, sweated and panted for air. (189)

It is a furnace. In this place, he struggled to earn his money. As Martin experienced the hard work and the horrible work conditions. Jack London did it, too, doing various types of labor throughout his life to pay his expenses. The stepfather of Jack London was physically weak, so Jack had to work for his family. He worked at the laundry at the Belmont Academy. The owners tricked Jack and another man into doing the work of the four men.

What he [Jack] did not know was that the owners of the institution had bought new equipment for the laundry with the assurance from the manufacturers that these machines would enable four men to do the work of twice that many. With this information in hand, the owners reasoned that two very sturdy men working at top speed and, if necessary, extra shifts without extra pay might do the work of four: “We sweated our way through long sizzling weeks at a task that was never done; and many a night, while the students snored in bed, my partner and I toiled on under the electric light at the steam mangle or ironing board.” Although he had brought along a truckload of books to read during his leisure hours, he was too exhausted to finish reading any of them. Try as he

might, he would fall asleep after reading the first few pages, and even those few pages he was too tired to remember.

In early June the academy closed for the summer, and Jack closed his book as a “work-beast” for the last time. If his coal-shoveling experience at the power plant had not been quite enough to convince him that he could never expect to rise in the world through the use of brawn, the Belmont Academy was the clincher. He renewed his vow to become a “brain merchant.” (*An American Life* 95-96)

Jack was working like a “work-beast” and so is Martin. He may be described as a “studying-beast” as well, like Jack London. His approach to writing was as follows. In the next quote, Martin attempts to read Fiske.

He was surprised at his weariness when he got into his room, forgetful of the fact that he had been on his feet and working without let up for fourteen hours. He set the alarm at six, and measured back five hours to one o'clock. He could read until then. Slipping off his shoes, to ease his swollen feet, he sat down at the table with his books. He opened Fiske, where he had left off two days before, and began to read. But he found trouble with the first paragraph and began to read it through a second time. Then he awoke, in pain from his stiffened muscles and chilled by the mountain wind that had begun to blow in through the window. He looked at the clock. It marked two. He had been asleep four hours. He pulled off his clothes and crawled into bed, where he was asleep the moment after his head touched the pillow. (190)

In this part of the novel, he has a hard time studying. These descriptions are quite illustrative. There are people who have enough time to study but they do not, while some people do not have enough time, yet they try to make time to learn.

In chapter nine, how he developed the ability to write is described. He is like a factory worker. Step by step, he completes the chore to the finish the piece. He decides to memorize twenty words in a day, and he does it.

After he had been through the grammar repeatedly, he took up the dictionary and added twenty words a day to his vocabulary. He found that this was no

light task, and at wheel or lookout he steadily went over and over his lengthening list of pronunciations and definitions, while he invariably memorized himself to sleep. “Never did anything,” “if I were,” and “those things,” were phrases, with many variations, that he repeated under his breath in order to accustom his tongue to the language spoken by Ruth. “And” and “ing,” with the “d” and “g” pronounced emphatically, he went over thousands of times; and to his surprise he noticed that he was beginning to speak cleaner and more correct English than the officers themselves and the gentleman-adventurers in the cabin who had financed the expedition. (113-114)

For Martin, education is not culture, but a weapon to get a good job, more of a task that he must complete. It is not something enjoyable, but rather a business.

As he works hard to educate himself, he starts to notice many things that he had not noticed before.

He went farther in the matter. Reading the works of men who had arrived, he noted every result achieved by them, and worked out the tricks by which they had been achieved—the tricks of narrative, of exposition, of style, the points of view, the contrasts, the epigrams; and of all these he made lists for study. He did not ape. He sought principles. He drew up lists of effective and fetching mannerisms, till out of many such, culled from many writers, he was able to induce the general principle of mannerism, and, thus equipped, to cast about for new and original ones of his own, and to weigh and measure and appraise them properly. In similar manner he collected lists of strong phrases, the phrases of living language, phrases that bit like acid and scorched like flame, or that glowed and were mellow and luscious in the midst of the arid desert of common speech. He sought always for the principle that lay behind and beneath. He wanted to know how the thing was done; after that he could do it for himself. He was not content with the fair face of beauty. He dissected beauty in his crowded little bedroom laboratory, where cooking smells alternated with the outer bedlam of the Silva tribe; and, having dissected and learned the anatomy of beauty, he was nearer being able to create beauty itself. (245)

In chapter twenty-three, Martin has learned something new about writing. In his “laboratory,” he is able to “dissect” the anatomy of beauty. At this moment, he is able to understand what beauty is. He can nearly control two; writing and beauty. Moreover, he can almost create beauty itself. He becomes an artist. It seems that a new or updated version of Martin Eden was born, or emerged like a butterfly from a larva.

III. Writing of an artist

In the previous section, we examined Martin’s and Jack’s approaches to writing. They both approached it much like factory workers, overburdened with their toil: so much hard work had to be put into producing words. Martin calculates his compensation by multiplying the words by the dollar rate. He wants to improve his writing by reading and remembering new words, much like a laborer would gather his tools. He focuses on the most cost-effective ways to make a living. However, this approach is at odds with the artistic urges that the young Martin feels. The reborn Martin is not a laborer working to produce as many words for as much money as possible, but a sensitive artist trying to express beauty for its own sake. In the following quote, we can see the physical laborer Martin being contrasted with the sensitive artist Martin:

The book was closed on his forefinger, and before he turned he was thrilling to the first new impression, which was not of the girl, but of her brother’s words. Under that muscled body of his he was a mass of quivering sensibilities. At the slightest impact of the outside world upon his consciousness, his thoughts, sympathies, and emotions leapt and played like lambent flame. He was extraordinarily receptive and responsive, while his imagination, pitched high, was ever at work establishing relations of likeness and difference. (34)

Martin was “a mass of quivering sensibilities” and “extraordinarily receptive and responsive.” He is a thick skinned laborer yet, beneath the surface he is a man of the most sublime sensibilities and an artistic talent. His emotions are described as a “lambent flame.” He has been described as a rough and strong man; yet, this

passage reveals a vulnerable or fragile part of his personality, the nature of an artist.

As he becomes successful in his writing, he looks back at his past. He ascends to another stage.

When he looked back now from his vantage-ground, the old world he had known, the world of land and sea and ships, of sailor-men and harpy-women, seemed a very small world; and yet it blended in with this new world and expanded. His mind made for unity, and he was surprised when at first he began to see points of contact between the two worlds. And he was ennobled, as well, by the loftiness of thought and beauty he found in the books. This led him to believe more firmly than ever that up above him, in society like Ruth and her family, all men and women thought these thoughts and lived them. Down below where he lived was the ignoble, and he wanted to purge himself of the ignoble that had soiled all his days, and to rise to that sublimated realm where dwelt the upper classes. All his childhood and youth had been troubled by a vague unrest; he had never known what he wanted, but he had wanted something that he had hunted vainly for until he met Ruth. And now his unrest had become sharp and painful, and he knew at last, clearly and definitely, that it was beauty, and intellect, and love that he must have. (103)

In this passage, Martin compares the lower class of his origins to the upper-class society to which Ruth belongs. The lower-class is described as dark, “soiled,” and “ignoble,” and lying beneath the “sublimated,” in the sense of the “realm” of beauty, intellect, and love. This is ironic because the proletarian values of hard, cost-effective labor have enabled Martin to succeed as a writer, thus giving him a chance to enter this “sublimated realm.” Now, however, he feels like all of the former life experiences must be “purged” from him. No wonder that he feels a “sharp and painful” unrest; the means for him to gain acceptance into Ruth’s world is fundamentally incompatible with the world itself.

There are more examples of the contrastive part of sentences at the beginning of chapter nine. After Martin went to travel treasure hunting to the Solomon Islands. He sailed back to San Francisco in a deep-water vessel. He made enough money to study and read for a while.

The creative spirit in him flamed up at the thought and urged that he recreate this beauty for a wider audience than Ruth. And then, in splendor and glory, came the great idea. He would write. He would be one of the eyes through which the world saw, one of the ears through which it heard, one of the hearts through which it felt. He would write—everything—poetry and prose, fiction and description, and plays like Shakespeare. There was career and the way to win to Ruth. The men of literature were the world's giants, and he conceived them to be far finer than the Mr. Butlers¹ who earned thirty thousand a year and could be Supreme Court justices if they wanted to. (114-115)

His feeling is flamed up. He targets “a wider audience” than Ruth. He grew up surrounded by the lower class; however, his writing opened a door for him to the upper class, characterized by the sublime in his view. He is a writer who can understand both, and create based on the knowledge of both, which gives him the advantage of seeing the universal condition of mankind and being able to express it through his literature. Therefore, he tries to act as a bridge between the two worlds and write a novel. He does not just write but recreates beauty. Moreover, he wants to be the eyes, ears, and heart of the people. This means that he aspires to be a guide for the people in the word. If the painter is an artist who makes the people understand what beauty is by using painting, Martin is a writing artist who wants to help people to understand what beauty is and what life is by using words.

IV. Conclusion

As he becomes more successful than an artist, the tension between the factory and the artist grows. He finds himself unable to choose between the two and grows dissatisfied with his situation. His friend Brissenden gives him the following advice:

“Love Beauty for its own sake,” was his counsel, “and leave the magazines

¹ A worker in Ruth's father's office: he lost his father, and went to night school. He started to work for only four dollars a week; however, he earned thirty thousand dollars now.

alone. Back to your ships and your sea—that’s my advice to you, Martin Eden. What do you want in these sick and rotten cities of men? You are cutting your throat every day you waste in them trying to prostitute beauty to the needs of magazinedom. (344)

The advice is that writing for magazines is incompatible with the “beauty for its own sake,” or art for its own sake, expressing nothing but the universal and the truth. Trying to do both is “cutting [one’s] throat every day” and “trying to prostitute beauty to meet the needs of magazinedom.” Brissenden’s advice is to “leave the magazines alone” and go back to the sea—in other words, to give up writing for the magazines completely. The writing factory and the artist cannot coexist.

As stated earlier, however, simply “going back to the sea” is not an option for Eden. The only way that he would have access to the world of Beauty and Love is through his writing and being a successful writer. Unlike Ruth, who is born wealthy, Martin must work for his money. Giving up the factory also means giving up being an artist. There is no way out of this dilemma, in Martin’s view.

At the end of the novel, Martin follows Brissenden’s advice literally. He goes to the sea, jumps into the ocean and drowns himself. The final sentence, “And at the instant he knew, he ceased to know” does not have a period. However, the sentence may not have to have a period because the poem by Swinburne goes after. Just before he commits suicide, he reads one of his poems aloud:

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. (479-480)

Martin thinks that he found the solution to his condition of an internal split. Based on this poem, “death was ready to soothe away to everlasting sleep.” (480) He decided to go to sea, following his friend’s advice and the poem² by Swinburne, except he followed the advice literally, choosing to end his suffering because it was the only solution for him.

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² When Martin was passionate about writing, he sometimes felt haunted by 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.’ (328)