

Wolf larsen's legacy



In the novel *The Sea-Wolf* by Jack London, Wolf Larsen's spirit lives in Humphrey. Even though Wolf's philosophy about life differs from both Humphrey's and Maud's, Humphrey's interaction with Wolf impacts him to the extent that he takes on some of Wolf's characteristics, thereby shielding Maud from the world's cruelty that Wolf symbolized. On one hand, Humphrey's exposure to Wolf shows him an alternative lifestyle and philosophy from the one to which he is accustomed, causing Humphrey to revert to Wolf's way of life, whether unconsciously or consciously. In contrast, Maud exhibits the same characteristics of frailty and need for protection throughout the novel and remains unaffected by the savagery and cruelty of Wolf. Clearly, Wolf makes a stronger impact on Humphrey and his spirit continues by Humphrey's imitation of him, as well as his role as Maud's physical guardian.

By the end of the novel, Humphrey evolves from a privileged and helpless man to one who proves his strength and capabilities by easily taking over Wolf's place as captain of the boat. The cruel environment Humphrey experiences on the boat causes him to alter his beliefs. By observing the reality of life and the need for strength, Humphrey's actions parallel Wolf's philosophy that a man must do whatever necessary in order to survive. Humphrey expresses joy when he says, " I felt myself a man of power as I looked at it. I did it! I did it! With my own hands I did it!" (p 274). Humphrey expresses his happiness when he realizes that he is just as equal and capable as other men. He exhibits confidence and no longer feels inferior. In fact, Humphrey feels like " a man of power," similar to Wolf. Humphrey implies that in times of struggle, he is no longer helpless, but can muster the

strength to overcome any hardship, just as Wolf had done in his never ending quest to survive. Throughout the novel, Wolf claims the role of the powerful man, but now Humphrey equates himself with Wolf, implying he feels superior to other men. By mentioning his "own hands," Humphrey exhibits a transformation; prior to joining the crew and Wolf, Humphrey never used his hands for physical work, and therefore never proved their strength.

Throughout the novel, Humphrey realizes that strength of a man's hands represent his ability to survive. When deciding what to do with Wolf's body, Humphrey recalls "the spirit of something I had seen before was strong upon me, impelling me to give service to Wolf Larsen as Wolf Larsen had once given to another man" (p 279). At an earlier point in the novel, the savage action of disposing a body by dumping it in the ocean horrified a dignified Humphrey. Wolf Larsen's example of a man who does whatever it takes to survive impacts Humphrey by causing him to thrust Wolf's body overboard, just as Wolf had done so many times. Without Wolf to make decisions, Humphrey takes on the responsibility of solving problems. By performing "service", Humphrey confidently assumes Wolf Larsen's position. At the same time, the reader might consider the "service" a duty a leader has to his followers, and by doing so Humphrey changes places with Wolf Larsen.

Maud remains true to her spirit by supporting Humphrey and relying on him to ensure her safety, which reveals that her exposure to Wolf and his extreme will to survive does not affect her. When Maud comes aboard the ship she seems delicate and frail, indicating that she relies on the physical

strength of others to keep her safe. By the end of the novel, Humphrey keeps Maud out of danger and “hurriedly led her aft to the safety of the poop” (p 280). As soon as any sign of danger appears, Humphrey instinctually ushers Maud to safety as a result of her neediness. Maud's exposure to Wolf does not alter her original persona. Rather than becoming a survivor like Humphrey and Wolf, Maud maintains her role as a physically weak person in need of protection. Maud does not resist Humphrey's urgency to take her to safety, further she proves her weakness by passively accepting Humphrey's offer which enables Humphrey to defend and shield her from evil. Since Humphrey now feels powerful, he becomes her protector. Humphrey refers to Maud as, “My woman, my one small woman” (p 280). In contrast to Wolf's mental and physical strength, Maud appears tiny. While Maud cannot change her size, she chooses not to alter her level of emotional strength even after her interaction with Wolf and witnessing his insistence to survive.

Humphrey's comment not only points out Maud's fragile stature, but also indicates possession of her by using the word “my.” By allowing Humphrey to act as though he owns her, Maud implies that she is open to having others claim her as property rather than asserting herself. Humphrey's statement reinforces Maud's need for someone to take responsibility for her and shows that the Wolf's determination to survive did not affect her. This vigorous protectiveness is a sign that Humphrey has absorbed the best of a character once contrasted with him, and perhaps avoided the worst.

Work Cited

London, Jack. *The Sea-Wolf*, New York: Random House, 2000.

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