

Realism and the Crisis of Individualism in Jack London's "Martin Eden"

Kakharova Mohigul Yusufovna
associate professor at Bukhara State University,
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Philological Sciences

***Abstract.** This article discusses "Martin Eden" (1909) by Jack London as a realistic novel that portrays the tragic fate of an individual who achieves intellectual and spiritual maturity yet becomes disillusioned with society. The novel is considered to be an autobiographical novel exploring how London reflects elements of his own life in the protagonist. The protagonist Martin Eden tries to educate himself to gain the love of his girlfriend in the novel. The novel traces Martin's transformation from an uneducated working-class youth into a self-taught intellectual driven by love, ambition, and an intense desire for self-improvement.*

***Keywords:** protagonist, education, well-mannered, intellectual development.*

INTRODUCTION.

The novel "Martin Eden" was written in 1909 by Jack London and is considered a realistic work. The author portrays the tragic fate of a person who attains intellectual maturity. Jack London reflected certain aspects of his own life in the novel *Martin Eden*. He elevates Martin Eden from a simple character to the level of a complex prototype. Throughout the work, the protagonist's philosophical views on life gradually change.

The events of the novel begin when the main character falls in love with a girl from the wealthy bourgeois class. Martin Eden is a sensitive and handsome young sailor. He meets Ruth, the daughter of the Morse family, who belong to the middle class. Ruth's upbringing, education, and beauty attract Martin deeply. He becomes so enchanted by her that he feels as if he is sailing the sea without a map or compass. Martin has spent

his whole life traveling at sea. His heart has always longed for love, and he has lived a lonely life. When he enters the bourgeois household, he hopes to gain the attention and approval of its members. When Ruth addresses him with a question, he replies politely, saying “Yes, miss” or “No, miss,” and to her mother, “Yes, ma’am” or “No, ma’am,” trying to present himself as well-mannered.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS.

At the beginning of the novel, Ruth considers Martin to be rude and uneducated. Blinded by love, Martin feels as if he is intoxicated. At the time, he lives temporarily at his sister Gertrude’s house. Her husband, Bernard, dislikes Martin and looks at him with hostility. Gertrude is a hardworking and devoted woman whose life is spent doing laundry and housework; her hands have become red from constant washing. Martin’s younger sister Marian works in a cannery. His parents, too, worked hard all their lives.

Martin compares his life with that of the girl he loves. Ruth’s hands are delicate, and the environment she lives in seems to him completely different, belonging to another world. He realizes there is a huge gap between them. To cross that gap, he must gain knowledge and become a cultured person.

Martin Eden’s Intellectual Development

When Martin enters the library and sees countless books, he is overwhelmed. He decides to undertake great efforts. He steps into the world of knowledge when he begins reading Swinburne’s poetry. Reading Rudyard Kipling’s poems, he learns how to love life.

Books teach Martin valuable lessons. He learns to dress neatly and behave properly. His pure love for Ruth urges him toward higher aspirations; he immerses himself in books and seeks to enrich his mind with knowledge as quickly as possible. In books, he encounters unfamiliar terms resembling Nietzsche’s teachings. He looks up

every term in the dictionary and studies its meaning. He borrows a book titled *The Fundamentals of Grammar* from the library and studies it thoroughly. This book teaches him the specific rules and structures of poetry. He begins to understand that harmony between meter and form is characteristic of verse. In his studies, he also explores literary theory, including the idea of poetry as a fine art.

At twenty years old, Martin begins discovering a new world—the world of knowledge. Books elevate his spiritual life, and he strives toward beauty and goodness. He writes many short stories, poems, essays, and articles and sends them to various magazines. He dreams of becoming a famous writer and living a happy life with Ruth. Ruth gradually begins to notice Martin’s intellectual growth. He now pronounces words correctly and no longer uses dialect expressions. Martin starts to perceive the beauty of life. However, magazine editors repeatedly refuse to publish his works.

CONCLUSION.

Martin wishes to depict realism in his writing. He lives by his dreams and distinguishes between two literary schools: one that presents human nature as divine, and another that portrays humans as animals. Martin considers this theory one-sided and refuses to accept it. His own understanding of literature gradually takes shape. In works such as “*Adventure*,” “*The Wine of Life*,” “*The Pot*,” and “*Joy*,” he portrays realistic events. His realistic outlook on life prevails, and he does not value works that are detached from reality.

Martin works tirelessly, often going hungry and sleeping only four to five hours a day while creating various works. He hopes to earn money from his writing and build a happy life with his beloved. Yet even when editors accept his stories, they fail to appreciate the true value of his labor.

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