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# The Conflict between Materialism and Idealism

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Sophomore

### The Conflict between Materialism and Idealism

In *The Sea Wolf* by Jack London, Humphrey Van Weyden is an American upper class gentleman on a ferry-steamer, but a collision almost drowns him in the sea. He is rescued by Wolf Larsen, the captain of a seal-hunting schooner named the *Ghost*. Forced to serve Wolf, Humphrey witnesses how Wolf treats his crew carelessly, for the Captain believes in Materialism, where life is only matter and has no value to others. Humphrey, on the other hand, argues for Idealism, the belief in spiritual values that transcend life such as love and honor. Although Wolf initially dominates the weak Humphrey, London showed his bias toward Idealism by portraying Humphrey as the victorious survivor.

The negative aspects of Materialism are demonstrated through the sailors' mutiny. London associated Materialism with selfishness, for Wolf is first identified as a Materialist when he says that "I do wrong always when I consider the interest of others" (London 55). Materialism is manifested when Wolf uses his physical strength to make others abide by his ways, but the results aren't positive. A man named Johnson is tired of submission, and when he buys unworthy oil skins from Wolf, he defies Wolf by speaking the truth. Wolf then beats Johnson until he can't stand, and Humphrey watches in terror. The other sailors fear Wolf's powers so much that they side with Johnson and attempt a rebellion. Although Wolf emerges victorious, Materialism does not. Through the situation, London portrays Materialism as a selfish philosophy that turns the whole crew against Wolf, who succeeds as a captain only by his physical strength, not beliefs.

The situation changes when Maud Brewster comes aboard the *Ghost*, for Wolf's power over the crew weakens. Brewster is a civilized Idealist who identifies with Humphrey and constantly argues with Wolf over philosophy. However, since Wolf lusts after her, he does not

hurt her and even treats the rest of the crew more gently. When Wolf's brother, Death, steals potential game, Wolf is outraged at the loss of profit, highly valuable to a Materialist, but Brewster argues against him by quoting, "Who steals my purse steals trash" (152). Wolf claims that her views are nonsense, but Brewster and Humphrey are not persuaded, and for the first time Materialism does not completely overpower Idealism. Finally, Wolf confesses that Idealists must be happier than himself, and he wishes that he "were blind to the facts of life and only knew its fancies and illusions" (154). If Wolf, the epitome of Materialism in this novel, wishes to join the Idealists, it is difficult to imagine London as a supporter of Materialism.

By the end of the book, Wolf dies while Brewster and Humphrey thrive through all difficulties. When the two Idealists escape on a small ship and land on a strange island, they keep a bright outlook regardless of supply shortages and lack of shelter. Because of their ideals, both risk their lives to protect each other. When Wolf crashes on the same island, however, he is presented as a pathetic contrast to the Idealists. While Wolf was weakened by a brain tumor, his crew successfully rebelled and escaped. Had Wolf not been a Materialist and cared for others, this may not have happened. Wolf's condition then worsens until he loses his eye-sight, hearing, and control over his body. Even so, Wolf ensures the Idealists that he is content. Humphrey and Brewster believe that: "He had too great strength...but now it no longer shackles him. He is a free spirit" (251). The Idealists' survival as well as their description of Wolf's death as the freeing of his soul, an Idealist element, from his body implies London's support of Idealism over Materialism.

Wolf Larsen's perfect physical strength allows him to live a Materialist life and force others to abide by his ways. Humphrey Van Weyden, an Idealist, can only witness initially. However, when he joins forces with Maud Brewster, the novel's turning point occurs. Wolf

slowly weakens and confesses the miseries of Materialism, and his death is viewed through Idealist eyes as the freeing of his soul. Therefore, London favored Idealism in *The Sea Wolf* by depicting the downfall of Wolf Larsen, the epitome of Materialism, and the rise of Humphrey and Brewster, the Idealists.

## Work Cited

London, Jack. *The Sea Wolf*. New York: Bantam, 1991. Print.