

JACK LONDON'S POSITIVE PORTRAYALS OF THE JAPANESE IN HIS EARLY FICTION DEFY HIS REPUTATION AS A RACIST

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Jack London (1876–1916), at his peak in the early years of the twentieth century, became one of the most popular and highest-paid writers in the United States. Several of his stories, such as *The Call of the Wild*, *White Fang*, and *The Sea Wolf*, remain as popular today as they were a century ago. However, it is rather ironic that he remains one of the most misunderstood writers of his era despite his enduring fame. Some scholars have accused London of being a racist who fed the flame of the “Yellow Peril.” The truth is that London was a true internationalist who admired Japanese and other Asians and who correctly predicted the rise of Asia in the twentieth century. He retained these pro-Asian feelings throughout his long career as a writer. Indeed, one of London’s last essays, published shortly before his death in 1916, urged the creation of a Pan-Pacific Club in Hawaii where white Americans and Easterners could meet in a large building to get to know each other on an individual basis.

One can trace London’s sympathetic view of Asians to the very start of his career when, on a brief visit to Japan in 1893 as a teenager, he acquired enough inspiration and material to compose two colorful tragedies, “Sakaicho, Hon Asi and Hakadaki” and “O Haru.”¹ These stories are important because they show tendencies in many of his later short stories – his deep sympathy and concern for “down and out” people, respect for women and Asians, and the use of a surprise ending as a key literary device.

London is far better known for his work as a journalist and photographer in Japan, Korea, and Manchuria during the opening months of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904, but it was his initial stay in Japan a decade earlier that provided his first encounter with a foreign land and inspired these two stories. In early 1893, London had joined the crew of a vessel, the *Sophie Southerland*, for its voyage from San Francisco to the cold waters of the

¹ These stories are available online (accessed May 25, 2021, <https://www.prosperosisle.org/spip.php?article229#stories>) and in Daniel Métraux, ed., *The Asian Writings of Jack London: Essays, Letters, Newspaper Dispatches and Short Fiction by Jack London* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2010), 104–108 (Sakaicho) and 114–124 (O Haru).

Bering Sea north of Japan and near the Siberian coast in search of seal skins. The ship made a brief stop in the Japanese-administered Bonin Islands on its outward journey and stopped in Yokohama for several weeks on its return to sell the seal skins to the Japanese market and collect provisions for the long trip back to California.²

In his 1913 book, *John Barleycorn*, London described this time in Japan as an autobiographical indictment of his excesses in drinking. He wrote about all the time he spent working on the ship and getting intoxicated at the port's many drinking establishments,³ but this is improbable, however. London's stories inspired by those experiences reveal his understanding of the local scenery. He had somehow toured parts of Tokyo, Yokohama, and Kamakura, where he spied the *Daibutsu*, a large outdoor statue of the Buddha.⁴

London published "Sakaicho, Hona Asi and Hakadaki" in 1895 while a student at Oakland High School in the institution's literary magazine, *The High School Aegis*, and "O Haru" in another publication in 1897. These two stories are an early indication of London's lifelong curiosity about ethnic and racial others. They are also notable for his admiration of Japanese culture. Through these stories, one can perceive the image of Japan that London portrayed to his reading public and the phenomenal potential for writing that he was already exhibiting as a teenager. These two stories relate to how London befriended a rickshaw driver and attended the dance of a beautiful geisha. These are not the tales of a drunken teenager who passed out every night in a Yokohama bar, but rather of a young man with an utter fascination for a new country which he was only briefly visiting on this occasion. Indeed, London could not have written such penetrating stories without close

² Earle Labor, *Jack London: An American Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 42–49.

³ London wrote: "We lay in Yokohama harbour...and all we saw of Japan was its drinking places where sailors congregated. Occasionally, some one of us varied the monotony with a more exciting drunk. In such fashion I managed a great exploit by swimming off to the schooner one dark midnight and going soundly to sleep while the water police searched the harbour for my body and brought my clothes out for identification." Quoted in Sachiko Nakada, *Jack London and the Japanese: An Interplay between the West and the East* (Tokyo: The Central Institute, 1986), 5.

⁴ Labor, *Jack London: An American Life*, 42–45.

observations of the area. It is also evident that he learned about the traditions and culture of Japan after reading books by writer and ethnologist Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904).⁵

A Realistic Portrait of a Yokohama Jinrikisha Man

“Sakaicho” is the short, ultimately tragic, and haunting story of a jinrikisha man who spends a week taking the narrator on a tour of local sites around the Tokyo and Yokohama regions. The life of a jinrikisha man was tough – it involved running long distances, up and down hilly streets and thoroughfares, transporting one or more individuals for a small amount of money. Because of intense competition from other jinrikisha men, the prices they charged were low, and the profits minimal at best. There were an estimated 40,000 or more rickshaws in operation in the Tokyo-Yokohama region at the turn of the last century. Because of their hard and stressful lives, many men like Sakaicho were dead before the age of forty.⁶

The story begins with Sakaicho and the narrator becoming good friends after a week of touring together.⁷ They visit temples, gardens, and other historic sites in the Yokohama and Kamakura regions. “All morning I had wandered from tea-house to temple, through bazaar and curio-shop.”⁸ Eventually, before the narrator is due to leave Japan with his ship, Sakaicho accords him with the great honor of inviting him to his house for an authentic Japanese meal and a chance to meet his wife Hona Asi and their son Hakadaki. The narrator accepts with gusto. Sakaicho and his hungry American guest traverse a poor section of Yokohama until they finally reach a small and dilapidated hut where they encounter Hona Asi, Sakaicho’s wife.

⁵ Lafcadio Hearn was a writer and journalist who in 1890 at age 40 settled permanently in Japan, married a Japanese woman, and raised a family with her. He wrote extensively on Japanese folklore and culture.

⁶ Bonny Tan, “Rickshaw,” Singapore Infopedia, January 25, 2005 (accessed June 24, 2021 https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_947_2005-01-25.html).

⁷ Sachiko Nakada writes: “Sakaicho is one of the rickshaw men waiting at the wharf for foreign sailors to take them to the city of Yokohama.” His name in the story seems to have been derived from the name of a block area near the wharf, “Sakaichō.” He spoke to London in “Yokohama English,” “Jock, you like come see my house? – not far – you come see my wife – come ‘chopee–chopee”” See Sachiko Nakada, *Jack London and the Japanese*, 5.

⁸ Quoted in Metraux, *The Asian Writings of Jack London*, 104.

Concerning the economic status of Sakaicho's family, London writes that his host owned his little house, really a humble shack, along with two jinrikishas, one of which he rented out at fifteen cents a day. His wife worked industriously at home, hemstitching silk handkerchiefs, sometimes making as much as eighteen cents a day. Hona Asi said she was only twenty-seven, but her face was so haggard that she looked at least forty. Toil and worry had marred her naturally pretty face and left it wrinkled and sallow.

The party smoke together briefly and then sip weak green tea, served by Hona Asi. Afterward, Sakaicho and the narrator sit back for a true Japanese feast. In accordance with Japanese custom, Hona Asi does not eat with the men. Instead, she waits on them with great attentiveness, removing the top of a round wooden box to ladle out two bowls of steaming, sweet-smelling rice and serving many intricate Japanese delicacies. The "savory odors" arising from the dishes whet the narrator's appetite, and he jumps into the meal. They share miso soup, boiled fish, stewed leeks, pickles and soy, sushi, *kurage* (a form of jellyfish), and endless cups of tea: "The soup we drank like water, the rice we shoveled into our mouths like coals into a Newcastle collier, and the other dishes we helped ourselves with the chopsticks by which time I could use quite dexterously."⁹ They also merrily sip sake from tiny, lacquered cups.

The narrator, noting that he normally found the Japanese to be a shrewd people with a keen interest in making money, is surprised with the hospitality of Sakaicho and a bit floored when the latter adamantly refuses the guest's generous offer of payment for the meal. He is overwhelmed by the kindness of his hosts and comments on the inherent goodness of the Japanese people.

After the meal, Sakaicho relates his struggles to his guest. Here we see for one of the first times London's sympathy for the hardships of the working classes who had to labor against harsh odds merely to survive. London was only nineteen when he wrote this story, but the descriptions of Sakaicho's abode and difficulties parallel those of characters found years later in *People of the Abyss* (1903) and other stories by him. One can clearly see the leanings that would make London an active socialist only a few years later.

With a melancholy tone, London describes Sakaicho's hard life in Yokohama. In his broken English, the Japanese man reminisces about his

⁹ *Ibid.*, 106.

youth, his struggles to survive, and even his ambitions. He once worked as a peasant in fields below Mount Fuji, but when he grew into adulthood, he found jobs working as a porter and as a driver of jinrikishas in Tokyo. Sakaicho managed to save enough money to eventually buy his house and two jinrikishas. His wife works hard at home, hemstitching silk handkerchiefs to supplement the family's income. All this was for their son, who goes to school so that he might have a chance to escape his parents' endless cycle of poverty. Sakaicho dreams of someday sending his son to America to further his education. Later that afternoon, the narrator meets the son, Hakadaki, "a sturdy rollicking little chap of ten." The narrator, genuinely enjoying the encounter, slips a Mexican dollar coin into "his sweaty little paw" before leaving.¹⁰

A week later, after returning to Tokyo from a busy time of sightseeing in Kyoto and around Mt. Fuji, the narrator searches in vain for Sakaicho all over Yokohama. He finally gives up and hires another rickshaw to do some last-minute sightseeing and shopping. He is cruising through the countryside near Yokohama when he encounters a funeral cortege with two small coffins: "A solitary mourner followed, and in the slender form and bowed head I recognized Sakaicho. But O! How changed! Aroused by my coming he slowly raised his listless head, and, with dull apathetic glance, returned my greeting."¹¹ The narrator later learns that Sakaicho's wife and boy had perished in a major fire that swept through their neighborhood.

After the Buddhist funeral, the saddened narrator returns to his ship. The joy and excitement surrounding the visit to Japan are gone, for he shares his friend's grief, the hardworking and kindhearted Sakaicho. "And, though five thousand miles of heaving ocean now separate us, never will I forget Sakaicho nor Hona Asi, nor the love they bore their son Hakadaki."¹² The fire had destroyed Sakaicho's family and effectively stifled his dreams.

This tale is a tragic but surprisingly unsentimental reflection on London's first visit to Japan. London presents detailed information about

¹⁰ Ibid., 106–107.

¹¹ Ibid., 107.

¹² Ibid., 108. The story of the fire is based on a true incident in Yokohama. On June 17, 1893, two weeks before London's arrival, a raging fire had destroyed more than 1600 homes in Yokohama. The fire started in Motomachi, not far from the wharf. London certainly saw the ruins of the great fire. See Nakada, *Jack London and the Japanese*, 6.

Japanese cuisine as well as a fairly accurate portrait of a small Japanese dwelling and the lives of Japanese working people of the period. Clearly, he has conversed with ordinary people in Japan, visited their homes, and empathized with their struggle to survive. One may find similar depictions in Hearn's works, even if Hearn had not yet published much of his enduring work when London first visited Japan. We also see the gestation of yet another feature of London's short stories – the sad or unhappy ending with an unexpected twist.

This tale about Sakaicho and his family reflects the theme of many of London's later stories and essays. London grew up in an impoverished family and had to work as a laborer in a canning factory as a young boy. His stories and books like *People of the Abyss* (1903) reflect his ideology and activity as an avowed socialist. London writes poignant stories about workers and poverty-stricken families who were victims of exploitation by wealthy and greedy capitalists. "Sakaicho, Hon Asi and Hakadaki" represents the beginning of London's repertoire of socialist literature.

The Sad Tale of "O Haru"

Jack London's "O Haru" is the sad and haunting tale of a beautiful geisha. It is not clear where he got the material or the idea for this story, but it is one of his best early pieces. The start is slow and unfocused, and the identity of the narrator is unclear. However, as the action picks up, we get more into the story, which ends with a dramatic crash. Like Sakaicho's tale, "O Haru" ends with a tragic and unexpected twist. The parallel themes of racial and gender oppression come together when O Haru's husband spurns her for a Caucasian girl.

The story begins with an exemplary description of the role and art of the geisha in Japanese society. Geisha, London notes, are the brightest and most accomplished of Japanese women. Chosen primarily for their beauty, they are educated from childhood in all the seductive graces of dance and forms of speech that make them appear both witty and alluring. The goal of their long training is to make them artistically fascinating. They lead active lives when they emerge as young women, but many suffer from poverty and neglect when they grow old.¹³

London here presents the reader with one of the finest concise descriptions of the geisha tradition in Japan. The fact that it was written over a century ago by a writer barely out of his teens is by itself remarkable. It is

¹³ Metraux, *The Asian Writings of Jack London*, 115.

one of the earliest indications that London would become a superb ethnologist and journalist as well as a novelist and short-story writer. This story provides the Western reader at the turn of the last century with a highly accurate view of the life of the Japanese geisha.

London next introduces the most accomplished and beautiful geisha of all, the fictional O Haru. A samurai's daughter, she had achieved great fame and fortune as an exquisite dancer. She was desired by some of the wealthiest men in the land, who would have surrendered much of their fortunes to have her for even one night, but she staked her love and future on a proud but impoverished samurai's son named Toyotomi. To her great regret, her beloved had gone to America a decade earlier, promising to enrich himself there before returning to Japan to marry her. In the following passage, London gives considerable attention to O Haru's beauty:

To the Occidental she could not appeal, while to the Japanese she was the ideal of beauty. Her figure, slender, long-waisted and narrow-hipped, was a marvel of willowy grace, rendered the more bewitching by the ease and charm of her carriage. Her bust was that of a maid's – no suggestion of luscious charms beneath the soft fold of her kimono – rather, the chaste slimness of virginity. Long, slender, beautifully curved, the neck was but a fitting pedestal for the shapely head, poised so delicately upon it. Her hair, long, straight and glossy black was combed back from the clear, high forehead – a wondrous dome to the exquisite oval of the face.

Her exquisite dancing, her moves and gestures, only added to her luster. The expression, never the same, the shifting mirror of every mood, of every thought, now responsive to vivacious, light-hearted gayety; now reflecting the deeper, sterner emotions; now portraying all the true womanly depths of her nature. Truly was she "O Haru, the dream of the lotus, the equal of Fugi [Fuji] and the glory of man!"¹⁴

¹⁴ Ibid., 116.

O Haru appears on stage clad in the armor of a Tokugawa-era samurai. She dances the role of Oishi Kuranosuke, one of the heroic ronin of the samurai epic *Chushingura*. Oishi's lord had been disgraced by a minister of the shogun and forced to commit *seppuku* because he raised his sword in anger at the minister. Oishi is one of the lord's forty-seven samurai who, a year later, assassinated the minister and then committed *seppuku* themselves. O Haru performs the whole story with poise and vigor. She reflects Oishi's passion as she enacts his tragic suicide at the end of the dance.

Despite her samurai heritage, O Haru was a destitute orphan who had sold herself to the master of a geisha house. She had learned all the dances and graces of a geisha and brought wealth to her master through public performances that wealthy men had paid dearly to admire. Toyotomi desired her as well and had spent everything he had to purchase her from the geisha house. She had agreed to marry her new master, but he told her to wait, that he wanted to go to the land of "the "white barbarians," promising to come back, rich and powerful, and marry her."¹⁵

Toyotomi, however, stays away for over a decade. She remains faithful to him despite marriage proposals from many affluent and prestigious men. Her lover finally returns from the land of the "barbarians" and, in fact, marries her, but to her horror, she soon realizes that he is a vastly changed man. She gives him her fortune, but he continually ignores her and spends his time carousing in tea houses and chasing after women of ill repute. He becomes a habitual drunk, an abuser obsessed with Western women with none of the beauty and charm of Japanese women. O Haru thinks these women repulsive, with their ugly, strangely shaped bodies and large faces disgustingly "mouthing themselves and their men."¹⁶

O Haru, profoundly depressed, visits a temple – perhaps the great Kamakura Daibutsu that London visited after his ship docked at Yokohama. A young priest blesses her and tells her the story of the Buddha and his discovery of the great truth: "Self, the mere clinging to life, was the evil; self was the illusion, whereby the soul endured the pain of countless incarnations; self was to be annihilated, and when destroyed, the soul passed to Nirvana. Nirvana, the highest attainable sphere, where peace and rest and bliss unuttered soothed the soul, weary from many migrations."¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid., 118.

¹⁶ Ibid., 120.

¹⁷ Ibid., 122.

O Haru returns home, pulls out her father's samurai sword, and prepares for her evening dance. She arrives to find the pavilion packed with people who wish to watch her performance, set to end with her favorite piece, the "Loyal Ronin." She dances with more intensity than ever before, especially when the "low crescendo" of the finale commences. She takes out her father's blade and vigorously kisses it. The audience shudders expectantly: "She is to follow her lord into the nether world, into the silent Nirvana. Her body sways in rhythmical undulations: her face is aglow with heavenly rapture: she poises for the blow. Now – the music rolls and crashes – swift, that deft, upward thrust – swift the mighty gush of blood... The sweet silence of the lotus-time night is rent with the sobbing agony of many voices: 'Woe! Woe! Woe! O Haru, the divine O Haru is no more!'"¹⁸

London wrote this story four years after his return from Japan and soon after his journey to the Yukon. He turned to writing full time and sold a number of his stories to some noteworthy journals and magazines. Possibly, through his reading of popular books and articles composed by Hearn, London had gained a sympathetic appreciation for aspects of Japanese culture. He admires and respects his heroine O Haru, allowing her to maintain her honor and self-worth through her ritual suicide.

London's understanding of Japanese culture is also impressive. The concept of regaining one's honor, which Toyotomi strips from O Haru when he betrays her love for him, is central to Japanese thought. London also values geisha as gifted artists, but even more remarkable is his grasp of the key tenets of Buddhism – the idea that one can reduce or eliminate suffering by letting go – in this case, the annihilation of the self. O Haru is in a unique position to regain her honor and punish her deceiving husband; she must eliminate herself by letting go of her life.

Another theme found in much of London's literature is his portrayal of men's mistreatment and exploitation of women. London's fictional women are strong, virtuous people who refuse to accept their reduced status and who fight back to regain their honor. O Haru frees herself from her abusive husband. London's later stories with Asian themes have similar women who can rise above their secondary positions in society. In this sense, London was a very modern writer whose stories and essays are as relevant today as they were just over a century ago. He was also one of the first Western writers to incorporate positive Asian themes into his works.

¹⁸ Ibid., 124.

London's Positive Portrayal of Asia and Asians

While lacking some of the incredible mastery of London's later stories like "To Build a Fire," these two stories show his innate talent as a young writer at the start of his career. He shows his sympathy for those less privileged and hits us with unexpected endings. London also effectively develops the personalities of his main characters while deftly bringing the reader into the story. The frequent twists that end his stories – the forlorn face of the grief-stricken Sakaicho and the image of O Haru plunging a sword into her abdomen while she dances before a large cheering crowd – add to the power of London's narrative.

London's stories are a refreshing break from the intense anti-Asian racist dogma found in contemporary Western literature. Some modern writers mistakenly portray London as anti-Asian. John R. Eperjesi, a London scholar, writes that "More than any other writer, London fixed the idea of a yellow peril in the minds of the turn-of-the-century Americans."¹⁹ Many biographers quote London, just after his return from covering the first months of the Russo-Japanese War for the Hearst newspapers in 1904, as telling a coterie of fellow socialists of his profound dislike for the "yellow man." Biographer Richard O'Connor quotes Robert Dunn, a fellow journalist with London during the Russo-Japanese War, saying that London's dislike of the Japanese "outdid mine. Though a professed socialist, he believed in the Kaiser's 'yellow peril.'"²⁰

If these charges are correct, they can cast London as a bigot and alarmist. However, a close examination of London's fictional and essay writing shows the opposite: he was ahead of his time intellectually and morally even as a teenager writing about people like Sakaicho and O Haru. His Russo-Japanese War dispatches from Korea and Manchuria around 1904–1905 are balanced and objective reporting, evincing concern and respect for the welfare of the average Japanese and Russian soldier, the Korean peasant, and the ordinary Chinese people he met. As perhaps the most widely read of the journalists covering that war, London emerges as one of

¹⁹ John R. Eperjesi, *The Imperialist Imaginary: Visions of Asia and the Pacific in American Culture* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth University Press, 2005), 108.

²⁰ Richard O'Connor, *Jack London: A Biography* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Co., 1964), 214.

the era's writers who sensed that the tide of white "superiority" and Western expansionism and imperialism was receding.

London knew that Japan's strength at the turn of the twentieth century lay in its ability to use Western technology and its national unity. Including London and some other contemporary writers, many politically attuned Asians recognized that Japan's defeat of Russia was a turning point in a history of Asian subjugation to white imperial powers. As no previous event, Japan's victory had called into question the innate superiority of the white race.⁵ And yet, London believed that there were severe limits on Japan's ability to become a leading world power. However impressive its initial gains, Tokyo would falter from lack of "staying power." One reason was that Japan was too small. Although it had humbled Russian forces, London believed that its might was insufficient to create a massive Asian empire, still less to threaten the West militarily or economically. Seizing "poor, empty Korea for a breeding colony and Manchuria for a granary" would substantially enhance Japan's population and strength – but that was not enough to challenge the great powers. London's view of Asians and the Pacific's other nonwhite people evolved in the last seven years of his life, during and after his 1907–1909 trip to the South Pacific aboard his decrepit schooner, the *Snark*. London's increasingly pan-national worldview led to his 1915 recommendation of a "Pan-Pacific Club" where Easterners and Westerners could meet congenially in a "forum" to exchange views and share ideas as equals. Far from being the thoughts of a racist, this is the vision of an internationalist.

It becomes apparent that London wanted Americans and Japanese to associate and foster mutual respect. In addition, as an analyst, London's understanding of how the industrial, politico-strategic, and social worlds were transforming surpassed that of his peers. His fiction and essays explore the emergence of new industrial powers in the East, as well as Western countermoves and inter-Asian tensions. London shrewdly predicted the coming age of revolution, total war, genocide, and even terrorism. As Jonah Raskin observed, "In a short, volatile life of four decades, Jack London (1876–1916) explored and mapped the territory of war and revolution in fiction and non-fiction alike. More accurately than any other writer of his day, he also predicted the shape of political power – from dictatorship to

terrorism – that would emerge in the twentieth century, and his work is as timely today as when it was first written.”²¹

Jack London traveled extensively in his short but active life. He encountered diverse cultures that he tried to understand. He empathized with the downtrodden in the United States, Hawaii, Europe, East Asia, and the South Pacific. His “Pan-Pacific Club” essay is his final appeal for the West to overcome its stereotypical view of Asians as inferior peoples who needed Western domination for their betterment. As London scholar Jean Campbell Reesman points out, “London’s story is a strident warning against race hatred and its paranoia, and an alarm sounded against an international policy that would permit and encourage germ warfare. It is also an indictment of imperialist governments per se.”²² Although London died in 1916, the words of this realistic and humane writer still speak to us.

²¹ Jonah Raskin, *The Radical Jack London: Writing on War and Revolution* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 1.

²² Jean Campbell Reesman et al., *Jack London: Photographer* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 65.