

“The Sea-Wolf” by Jack London [B2]

È un classico che esplora il potere, la moralità e l'istinto di sopravvivenza, unendo filosofia e avventura attraverso il confronto tra un intellettuale idealista e un capitano senza scrupoli.

Jack London was one of the world's most prolific and best-selling authors of the early 20th century. The Sea-Wolf, published in 1904, is a **thrilling** nautical adventure combining themes of naturalism, romance and the Darwinian **drive for survival**. The novel describes the battle of **wills** between Humphrey Van Weyden, an educated literary critic, and Wolf Larsen, a brutal sea captain.

DROWNING

When his boat **sinks** in San Francisco Bay, Van Weyden fears he will **drown**. Rescued by a passing ship, the **ominously** named Ghost, he finds himself questioned by the ship's captain. Expecting to be **put safely to shore**, Van Weyden is instead given an ultimatum by Larsen: “ ‘What do you do for a living?’ ... ‘I-I am a gentleman.’ [...] ‘Who feeds you?’ was his next question. ‘I have an income...’ ‘Who earned it? Eh? I thought so. Your father. You stand on dead men's legs. You've never had any of your own. You couldn't walk alone between two sunrises and hustle the meat for your belly for three meals. Let me see your hand. [...] Good for little else than dish-washing and scullion work [...] you take the cabin-boy's place [...] it's for your own soul's sake. It will be the making of you.’ ” “«Che cosa fa per vivere?» «Io... io sono un gentleman» [...] «Chi è che la mantiene?», fu la domanda successiva. «Ho una rendita...» «E come se l'è guadagnata? Eh? Suo padre, s'intende. Lei si sostiene con le forze altrui. Non è mai stato capace di stare in piedi ventiquattrore per procurare del cibo al suo stomaco. Mi mostri la sua mano. [...] Buone tutt'al più per un lavoro da sguattero.prenderà il posto del mozzo [...] È per il suo bene, mi creda, è proprio quello che ci vuole per lei.”

LIFE IS A MESS

As a cabin boy, Van Weyden faces daily humiliation and violence. Larsen, an intelligent, self-educated man, enjoys conversing with him about the meaning of life and the existence of the human soul. Larsen voices his contempt for the way capitalism favours people like Van Weyden, who, in turn, questions what the captain believes in. "I believe that life is a mess," he answered promptly. "It is like yeast, a ferment, a thing that moves and may move for a minute, an hour, a year, or a hundred years, but that in the end will cease to move. The big eat the little that they may continue to move, the strong eat the weak that they may retain their strength. The lucky eat the most and move the longest, that is all." "«Credo che la vita è una pietanza», rispose, pronto. «È come un lievito, un fermento, qualcosa che si muove per la durata di un minuto, un'ora, un anno o un secolo, ma che cesserà di muoversi. Il più grosso mangia il più piccolo allo scopo di muoversi ancora, il più forte mangia il più debole per conservare la sua forza. Il più fortunato mangia di più e si muove più a lungo. Ecco tutto. Cosa ne pensate?»"

MORAL COURAGE

Larsen treats people as commodities, little different to the seals he hunts during the voyage. When his crew threatens mutiny, he uses brute force and intimidation to subdue them. Van Weyden is promoted to ship's mate. He has learnt that trying to reason with Larsen, or appeal to his humanity, will always fail. When a female passenger, Maud Brewster, comes on board, she is angry that Van Weyden has not done more to protect the crew from Larsen. "What would you advise, then?" I asked. "That I should take a knife, or a gun, or an axe, and kill this man?" She half started back. "No, not that!" "Then what should I do? Kill myself?" "You speak in purely materialistic terms," she objected. "There is such a thing as moral courage, and moral courage is never without effect." "Ah," I smiled, "you advise me to kill neither him nor myself, but to let him kill me." I held up my hand as she was about to speak. "For moral courage is a worthless asset on this little floating world." "«Che cosa vorreste, dunque?», domandai. «Che prendessi un coltello, un fucile o un' ascia per uccidere quell'uomo?» Diede un sussulto, indietreggiando. «No, questo no!» «Allora, che cosa potrei fare? Suicidarmi?... «Parlate in un senso

tutto materiale», obiettò. «Ma esiste anche il coraggio morale, che non rimane mai senza effetto.» «Ah!», dissi sorridendo. «Voi non mi consigliate di uccidere, ma di lasciarmi uccidere.» Con un gesto della mano le impedii di parlare. «Il coraggio morale non ha valore su questo piccolo mondo galleggiante.»”

MENACE

Van Weyden toughens up mentally and physically during the voyage. At the same time, Larsen, stricken by some unknown illness, weakens and goes gradually blind. Eventually, Van Weyden and Brewster escape to a remote island. But the menace of Wolf Larsen is never far behind, as Brewster’s intuition suggests: “Something is going to happen – is happening, for that matter. I feel it. Something is coming here, to us. It is coming now. I don’t know what, but it is coming.” “«Sta per succedere qualcosa, o forse è già successa. Lo sento. Non so cosa sia, so soltanto che sta per arrivare.»”

SUPER-MAN

Can Van Weyden and Brewster escape? The author keeps us guessing to the end. After the success of *Call of the Wild* (1903), *The Sea-Wolf* quickly became a best-seller. Partly based on London’s own experience, and a real-life sea captain, the novel was intended to counter Nietzsche’s super-man (Übermensch) ideal. In Wolf Larsen, Jack London certainly created one of literature’s most memorable characters.

Glossary

- **threatens** = minacciare
- **toughens up** = indurirsi
- **thrilling** = emozionante
- **drown** = annegare
- **cabin boy** = mozzo
- **seals** = foche
- **to counter** = contrastare
- **sinks** = affondare
- **put safely to shore** = portare a terra
- **contempt** = disprezzo
- **commodities** = merci
- **ominously** = sinistramente
- **crew** = equipaggio
- **mutiny** = ammutinamento
- **subdue** = reprimere
- **weakens** = indebolirsi
- **goes gradually blind** = diventare cieco
- **guessing** = indovinare
- **drive for survival** = istinto di sopravvivenza
- **wills** = volontà
- **mate** = ufficiale di bordo
- **stricken** = colpito, afflitto