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NEGOTIATING IDENTITY THROUGH SPORTS AND OUTDOOR IN JACK LONDON'S FICTION

Abstract: Jack London went down in literary history as a versatile and colourful author. Having drawn from his abundant biography (London was preoccupied with journalism, pouching and gold digging, among others), he became a prominent representative of the "adventurous Romanticism". Critics and readers have also acknowledged and appreciated his considerable input into the tradition of sporting writing, as he frequently contextualized the dilemmas he explored in the sporting terrain. The main aim of the article is to present how London shapes various identities of his characters through sporting and outdoor activities. It is valuable to demonstrate how sports and outdoor experience, seemingly a trivial and common element of human existence, becomes crucial in the process of developing one's ethnicity, nationality, female and various forms of cultural belonging. The material selected for analysis constitutes three titles: "A Royal Sport" from *The Cruise of the Snark* (1911), "On the Makalooa Mat" (1919) and "The Mexican" (1911).

Keywords: sports writing, Jack London, outdoor

Introduction

Already in 1970, Wojciech Liponski complained about the shocking absence of sports in academic humanities research. Although a cultural phenomenon and one of the most basic aspects of human activity, it had been neglected by sociologists, pedagogues, philosophers and historians. The reason for that, as Liponski held forth, lay in a centuries-old tradition of undermining sports and physical education in the process of shaping generations. This tradition dates back to the Middle Ages; physical beauty and fitness embodied sin and paganism, and was supplanted by the cult of spiritual values (9).¹ With such an attitude long gone, various fields, from economics, through marketing to cultural studies and tourism have included sports as an important area of their deliberations. Not literary studies, though. One may get the impression that European literary scholars and critics, including Polish ones, welcome sports writing with a pint of salt not giving much attention to its importance and literary value.

Unfair and detrimental, American readers and critics have by all means abandoned such understanding of sports writing. One of the finest American writers serve an example to break these invidious stereotypes. Ernest Hemingway's autobiographical,

¹ Translation from Polish by Paulina Korzeniewska-Nowakowska.

raw and naturalistic descriptions of boxing (as he would famously say, “my writing is nothing, my boxing is everything”) found a crucial place in his short stories and novels posing questions about human determination and sacrifice. As observed by Myers, “something as primal as boxing naturally provides a rich abundance of enduring metaphors concerning power, fear, life and death that have struck a chord with many writers” (2007). Nowadays a highly questionable discipline of bull-fighting was also among Hemingway’s favorites, which he frequently used in his plots examining the edges of human mercy and people’s undeniable need to enjoy violence and cruelty. David Foster Wallace, Phillip Roth, Cormac McCarthy or Bernard Malamud, just to name a few, all explored and challenged the arcana of human character and mind by means of making their characters athletes and their settings – athletic arenas. A considerable oversight would be not to include Jack London into this notable circle. “Jack London was our first celebrity sportswriter”, as stated by Lachtman (XI), and it would be difficult not to agree with such a bold, yet well-earned, comment. Having drawn from his eventful and colourful life (one needs to know he occupied himself with poaching, sailing, gold digging and journalism, among others), London left behind massive literary heritage based on his sporting and outdoor experience. The notion of *outdoor* is mentioned here not without reason as these are outdoor activities that lie at the core of most of London’s fiction. In the present article, I would like to address the issue of developing identities by means of sporting and outdoor experience in London’s selected writings. I understand the notion of identity in a broad sense; as both a self-concept (Baumeister 1997) and a formation of social belongingness, and more generally – as a human quality which makes a person unique, different (or similar) to others. As identity formation may take place on a number of levels, the focus of the article will be narrowed down to the categories of culture, gender, ethnicity and self-development as seen by London. The research data consist of a few short stories which epitomize the perspective I wish to provide: “A Royal Sport” from “The Cruise of the Snark” (1911). “On the Makalooa Mat” (1919) and “The Mexican” (1911). My interpretations will be preceded by a brief introduction to the outdoor studies and their importance to American studies, whose understanding goes hand in hand with a close reading of London’s texts.

I will pursue my research by means of a confluence of two methodological approaches. On the one hand, cultural criticism will serve as a diachronic tool to explore economic, political and historical conditions of literary texts paying attention to those marginalized in terms of gender or class. Cultural studies, moreover, use insights from various fields, such as history, psychology and, also, sports (Templeton 1992: 19), which makes them an interdisciplinary and multipurpose research facilitator. On the other hand, I will employ concepts of sociological criticism, which examines literature as manifestation of society, and by extension, societal behaviors, habits and dynamics

in a variety of contexts. In other words, it diagnoses social categories and orientations, and sees literatures as „equipment for living” (Burke 293-304).

Outdoor studies and their literary representation

The authors of *Routledge International Handbook of Outdoor Studies* define outdoor as “the term that fruitfully encompasses a broad range of approaches, foci and methods such as, but not limited to, experimental learning, adventure education, [...] environmental education, outdoor leadership, nature-based sport and wilderness therapy” (Henderson, Humberstone and Prince 2). The outdoor studies, however, touch upon a variety of other areas and topics: life style, health-promoting trends, social studies, tourism and eco-tourism, literature, philosophy, art, etc. In other words, they examine those spheres of human activity in which people interact with the natural environment. To grasp the phenomenon of *outdoor* in the American realm, one needs to also examine the notion of *wilderness* – the concept which already accompanied newcomers as they settled in the New World in the XVII century. The geographical location of today's Canada and the northern part of the United States was a considerable challenge in terms of logistics, as severe weather conditions, demanding landform and backcountry covered with forest meant a heavy beginning for those who chose to start a new home there. “It was instinctively understood as something alien to man – an insecure and uncomfortable environment against which civilization had had waged an unceasing struggle” (Nash 8). Boundlessness of nature and its overwhelming power over men aroused the feeling of solitude and helplessness in the face of calamity. The perception of nature as an inhospitable and violent enemy inspired a proactive attitude, though. In wilderness, Puritans saw a beast that needed to be tamed, a place to harness with the help of God. Soon after, wilderness became a state of mind rather than a purely geographical obstacle; it left a significant imprint on the American thought. In “Wilderness and the American Mind”, Nash admits that it had an immense impact on the formation of both American and Canadian identities ; it became a crucial part of the origin myth and a unifying factor in building nations, especially in the face of incomprehension and enmity between various ethnic groups striving to build a country. Vicissitudes of their history and fortune accompanied by rough natural conditions served as strong inspirations not only for settlers, but also for artists.

Given the Canadian and American preoccupation with the wilderness and nature, they found their significant manifestation in outdoor literature. Examples could be multiplied indefinitely. Pivotal representatives of *nature writing*, such as Emerson, Burroughs and Thoreau, whose cult *Walden* (1854), a philosophical reflection on the condition of the world of his contemporaries encouraged by his solitary time spent

in the back and beyond, epitomize main ideas of the outdoor experience. Atwood's *Wilderness Tips* (1991), a short stories collection evincing isolation and misery of an individual, show hostility of nature serving as a metaphor for life adversities. Vastly popular novels, such as Michael Punke's *The Revenant: A Novel of Revenge* (2002) and Cheryl Strayed's *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* (2012), both filmed and showered with awards, also explore the wilderness experience at its finest.

'Jack of all sports': London's preoccupation with outdoor and sports writing

Jack London combines it all. He is a keen observer of the surrounding nature, an informed reporter of human life in line with natural laws and an enthusiastic fan of outdoor activities - sports and pastimes which contribute to the image of his typical character as a *homo ludens*². In "Royal Sport," London explores the arcana of surfing. Allegedly, in the early 1900s, he saw a surfer from the Waikiki beach in Hawaii and became amazed by his skilful command of the surfing board and bold attitude towards the powerful and destructive force of water. The surfer in question, Alexander Fume Ford, a traveller and an enthusiast of sports, introduced London to the discipline and served as an inspiration to the creation of the story's main character.

The story's narrator begins his deliberation on the beauty of surfing with a sullen ascertainment about the human spirit.

[...] one feels microscopically small, and the thought that one may wrestle with this sea raises in one's imagination a thrill of apprehension, almost of fear. Why, they are a mile long, these bull-mouthed monsters, and they weigh a thousand tons, and they charge in to shore faster than a man can run. What chance? No chance at all, is the verdict of the shrinking ego; and one sits, and looks, and listens, and thinks the grass and the shade are a pretty good place in which to be (London 1981: 3).

Self-doubt and inferiority seem to prevail in his judgement on men's abilities. The persona identifies himself as weak, in awe of the forces of nature and respectful towards its perspective. London describes him as "erect, full-statured, not struggling frantically in that wild movement [...] He is a Mercury – a brown Mercury" (1981: 4). One may easily notice the immediate change of his tone as the surfer's achievements on the surfing board transfer into much deeper thought on the human quality – you may rise, develop and overcome any obstacle, which in a time of omnipresent coaching seems particularly up to date. London continues: "[Y]ou are a man, one of the kingly species and that that Kanaka³ can do, you can do yourself" (1981: 5). Either a form of the American dream or a major dose of self-motivation, London suggests that sport

² The term *homo ludens* was coined by Johan Huizinga in the book by the same title, in which he discusses the significance of play in the process of shaping culture and society.

³ A native Hawaiian.

puts a man on a pedestal, *makes* him, provides him with success, hence incorporates achieving goals into the human nature. Sporting activities strengthen the character's physique, but also reveal, as London seems to suggest, an athlete's unusual qualities, his superiority over any odds, the ability to practise and master a difficult discipline.

A significant importance of Hawaiian outdoor and sports is manifested in the short story, "On the Makaloa Mat". It brings forward the lives of two elderly sisters, true-born Hawaiians, who meet to reminisce about their youth and the times long gone. The collection by the same name in which the story was originally published depicts rural and pastoral Hawaiian islands in the face of the clash with the Western civilization.⁴ Bella and Martha, both entrapped in patriarchal-model families (in this case, white men marrying Hawaiian women) for the first time share their youthful dreams and hopes with each other. Their words reverberate with sadness and nostalgia, yet Bella seems to have come to terms with her situation and speaks of her husband, George, with nothing but respect for his hard work and goodness. It is, however, when she mentions the horse she received from her lover, and used to ride that Bella's tone changes thoroughly and the reader may get to know her true colors. Not only does it offer an insight into the character in her outdoor, traditional activities, but also speaks volume about her psychological profile. This is how she portrays the animal:

But Hilo! I was the first woman on his back. He was a three- year-old, almost a four-year, and just broken. So black and in such a vigour of coat that the high lights on him clad him in shimmering silver. He was the biggest riding animal on the ranch, descended from the King's Sparklingdow with a range mare for dam, and roped wild only two weeks before. I never have seen so beautiful a horse. [...] Oh, when he ran with me up the long-grass slopes, and down the long-grass slopes, it was like hurdling in a dream, for he cleared the grass at every bound, leaping like a deer, a rabbit, or a fox- terrier—you know how they do. And cut up, and prance, and high life! He was a mount for a general, for a Napoleon or a Kitchener. And he had, not a wicked eye, but, oh, such a roguish eye, intelligent and looking as if it cherished a joke behind and wanted to laugh or to perpetrate it (London 1965: 123).

London brings together different kinds of identity formation. Horse riding gives Bella a possibility to be her true self on a number of levels. Firstly, it reminds her of her Hawaiian heritage which, on a daily basis, stays overshadowed. As a rider, she may embrace her Hawaiian character: dynamic, hot-blooded, passionate, enjoying her closeness to nature. As Reeseman (2011: 173) observes, "true cultural identity is not based here in race". Bella finds comfort in retaining her essential *hawaiiness*, even though it is in an ostensibly trivial episode of horse riding. The horse and carefree time it represented undoubtedly awakens her ethnic belongingness.

⁴ As London wrote in a letter to Edgar G. Sisson, "[t]his is true and genuine and correct and right of the old Hawaiian life (1988: 1553).

Instead of constantly fulfilling Bella's role of a housewife, her husband's obedient, submissive and silent companion, she could also experience a momentary escape into her true womanhood. The description of her encounter with Hilo was not only a treat which took Bella's mind off a humdrum life she led with George, but also a chance for her to experience true romance. Thus, the horse represents much more; namely, a gift of momentary happiness. Furthermore, as Bella proudly mentions, she was the first woman to ride Hilo and she elaborates on how magnificent the beast was. This also gives her a sense of uniqueness, some sort of personal satisfaction and fulfilment she could not find in her daily routines.

Probably the strongest and the most telling image of identity formation could be, however, found in London's short story "The Mexican". The author, a committed supporter to the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), challenges the theme of the common man's political involvement in a populist revolt against Porfirio Diaz's tyrant regime. London chooses boxing as his main tool for that involvement, as "[a]thletes for whom victory in a contest is also victory for a cause have become legend in both life and literature" (Lachtman 122). The eponymous Mexican, Felipe Rivera, joins the Junta organization to serve the revolution. Little do his fellow comrades know about his past; Rivera provides money for the revolutionary activities, yet does not reveal its source or discuss his motivations. The Juntas attempt to define him, but his identity stays strangely elusive, as if the more they are trying to get to the bottom of his background, the less familiar he is to them. Rivera displays barely any qualities; he is a nobody and an everyman at the same time.

"A great and lonely spirit, perhaps, I do not know, I do not know," Arrellano said helplessly. "He is not human," said Ramos.

"His soul has been seared," said May Sethby. "Light and laughter have been burned out of him. He is like one dead, and yet he is fearfully alive."

"He has been through hell," said Vera. "No man could look like that who has not been through hell--and he is only a boy."

Yet they could not like him. He never talked, never inquired, never suggested. He would stand listening, expressionless, a thing dead, save for his eyes, coldly burning, while their talk of the Revolution ran high and warm. From face to face and speaker to speaker his eyes would turn, boring like gimlets of incandescent ice, disconcerting and perturbing.

"He is no spy," Vera confided to May Sethby. "He is a patriot--mark me, the greatest patriot of us all. I know it, I feel it, here in my heart and head I feel it. But him I know not at all" (London 1981: 126).

At this juncture, Rivera is a boxer who fights for money so that he can fund the revolution and in the story's climax fights against Danny Ward, an awarded American champion, to gather money for necessary guns. He is supposed to be "the lamb led to slaughter at the hands of the great Danny" (1981: 139). It is also when London describes the boy's true motives and hatred for boxing; it becomes a vehicle for his hidden anger

and grief over his deceased family. At first, one may get the impression that the boxing London presents in the story is a rotten, corrupt and primitive sport, thoroughly devoid of values, such as fair-play, brotherhood and equality.⁵ As the fight proceeds, however, the reader may notice Rivera's determination and patient, methodical approach to his performance. All in all, it becomes clear that the will to gather the money for the Juntas is his primary desire, and boxing is portrayed as a powerful tool in hands of a young revolutionist. Rivera, a misunderstood loner, almost a Romantic hero, even "an Übermensch" as Furer puts it, wins the fight. As Furer further observes, "this superior individual fighting for the people combines the two attributes London valued the most: individual mastery and dedication to the socialist cause" (1998: 171).

In the story's finale, it is Felipe's national spirit that comes to the forefront. He may not be a born revolutionist, a brilliant speaker or a charismatic leader, yet he proves to be a devoted Mexican. Unsupported and alienated, tormented by personal trauma and fiercely determined, he wins an unwinnable fight and, *ipso facto*, saves the revolution.

There were no congratulations for Rivera. He walked to his corner unattended, where his seconds had not yet placed his stool. He leaned backward on the ropes and looked his hatred at them, swept it on and about him till the whole ten thousand Gringos were included. His knees trembled under him, and he was sobbing from exhaustion. Before his eyes the hated faces swayed back and forth in the giddiness of nausea. Then he remembered they were the guns. The guns were his. The Revolution could go on (London 1981: 153).

Already the story's title suggests that Rivera's national belongingness is especially grounded in the text's significance, but it is the final passage that epitomizes his strong sense of patriotism. As opposed to canning and dishonourable *Gringos*, Rivera stays unshaken. He does not enjoy his victory, though, as he keeps focusing on the cause.

Conclusion

As it has been demonstrated, sports and outdoor writing brings an interesting input to the studies of identity in American literary expression. The introductory remarks on the phenomenon of outdoor experience evinced how interdisciplinary and universal field it is, whereas a brief description of the *wilderness* put this approach into the American context and also grasp an understanding of the specificity of the American literary terrain. The three characters selected for interpretation in the article presented different aspects of identity, their common ground being negotiating that identity through a broadly understood sporting activity. The narrator of "A Royal Sport" manages to find his inner strength and personal value in his attempts to master the art of surfing.

⁵ In a symptomatic passage, Danny Ward, applauded by the crowd, shakes Rivera's hand smiling, yet whispers to him "You little Mexican rat, [...] I'll fetch the yellow outa you" (1981: 142).

Bella, the “On the Makaloa Mat” protagonist, finds her lost womanhood and forgotten ethnicity in a simple pastime of horse riding, whereas Felipe Rivera, in “The Mexican”, builds his national identity through boxing for the cause of the Mexican Revolution. All these multidimensional characters and their endeavours show how crucial sports in the analysis and interpretation of a literary text can be and how London’s over a hundred-year-old work still attracts an inspiring and complex reading.

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