

# Gender, Power and Ideological Discourse: A Case Study\*

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**I**N THE following study we will focus our attention on Jack London's proto-dystopia, *The Iron Heel*, a story which, under the aegis of scientific socialism, offers a projection of the violent acts generated by the establishment of a new social order (the proletariat) and the abolition of the old one.<sup>1</sup> *The Iron Heel* detaches itself from the status of utopia, violence being the only way of instituting the new social order: "While Bellamy . . . saw the socialist future as part of a peaceful conversion led by an emancipated but domesticating new woman, London saw the future as a violent struggle requiring a kind of masculinization of women" (Knigh 2001, 25). We shall make use of Tom Moylan's concept of proto-dystopia, considering the fact that this is the best suited term for a work that "saw the defeat of the socialist movement and held out hope of a triumphant revolution only in some not yet achieved future" (Moylan 2000, 149). We shall also employ the triangulation strategy, namely we will make use of three methods belonging to three different methodologies, which will allow for a relevant analysis, based on multiple fields of interpretation.

According to David Silverman, the methodology is the broader frame and subject to a certain paradigm, whereas the method is the one that finds expression in this context, depending entirely on it (Silverman 2004, 19). The methodology is the matrix, while the method interposes itself only as a manifestation in the space of this matrix.

In what concerns the first methodology we chose to adopt a feminist perspective, as for the method, we decided to go with gender studies. Gender studies focus on sexuality and power relations. An analysis of the novel from the perspective of gender studies will not only allow us to diagnose the social stereotypes reflected in the novel, but also follow the social code within which the woman is placed. We also aim at engaging the field of Marxist methodology or else the domain of anthropology and visual sociology. Here, the most productive is cultural criticism. Given the fact that there is "a direct relationship between the symbols used and the exterior projection of the social meaning" (Pop 2004, 93), we shall try to identify the connection between the visual elements

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and the entrenched social structures. Just as Doru Pop argues, the method imposes itself due to the fact that any image or discourse analysis is based on a type of experience which “composes itself as a social construct whose interpretation is the result of the codes induced by the environment from which the receiver is part of” (Ibid.). Apart from the subject’s desires, projections and individual needs, one can also distinguish more complex patterns generated by the cultural codes he belongs to. The ideological, political or social codes represent a significant domain of investigation which can help us distinguish both the way in which literary strategies appeal to the collective psyche, as well as what types of stability structures they generate.

Furthermore, the third part of our research will be placed within the framework of the situational phenomenological methodology, by observing the historical context in which the event takes place. We will formulate our observations and interpretations with reference to historical analysis. According to the volume coordinated by Alex Mucchielli, this method is based on both “the analysis of mutual influences (effect of A over B, and also of B over A),” as well as on “the way in which the subject perceives the environment and its elements.” As a consequence one will be able to determine “similarities at the level of the structures based on contexts” (Mucchielli 2004, 78).

As far as the feminist perspective is concerned, even upon a very first reading, one can notice that the male character holds the power in relation with the feminine; he is the one who dominates, the one who dares: “As Ernest talked he seemed in a fine passion; his face glowed, his eyes snapped and flashed, and his chin and jaw were eloquent with aggressiveness. But it was only a way he had” (London 2009, 5). We are dealing therefore with a social stereotype: the male has an aggressive, commanding attitude, while the female is characterized by her smiling figure, softness, acceptance, and emotional openness. He is the harsh one, who is not afraid of anything (in the novel the narrator makes repeated remarks about this fundamental quality of her husband). He is the *hero*, the character who writes history and changes the world, whereas she is the one who stands behind him in support, who willingly keeps herself in a state of faithful expectancy and submissiveness towards the male character.

Despite the fact that, from a historical point of view, the struggle for the empowerment of women was a subject of great concern (women were organizing themselves in associations strongly demanding their right to vote and equal rights with those of men) both during the year in which the novel was written (1906), as well as during the years in which the action unfolds (1911-1912),<sup>2</sup> London still makes use of power roles in accordance with the classic stereotypes. This portrayal of the masculine-feminine relation does not only distribute the power roles from a sexual point of view, but it also creates social codes: “The human tendency to use signs and symbols means that evidence of social worth and of mutual evaluation will be conveyed by very minor things, and these things will be witnessed, as will the fact that they have been witnessed” (Goffman 1955, 226). Consequently, the power balance between the two protagonists becomes exponential for all feminine-masculine relations belonging to the world described in the novel, and by exploring we might conclude that all types of human interaction, within London’s work, are constructed in the form of stereotypes.

Despite these stereotypical portrayals and gender differences, the narrator (except from the footnotes which offer explanations, retrospective insights and post-factum interpretations) is portrayed as a feminine character (Avis Everhard), which allowed critics many different interpretations. For example, John Whalen-Bridge argues that the decision of choosing a feminine narrator represents a marketing strategy (given the era was marked by women's desire towards emancipation and earning rights) meant to allow both men and women to identify themselves with the protagonists: "London's novel, then, speaks in both the masculine and feminine gender lects and thus reaches a wider audience" (Whalen-Bridge 1988, 97). The premise, according to which the construction of the novel is nothing more than a strategy aimed at convincing the readers of the necessity for the novel's ideological perspective, is somehow certified by London's bibliographical data, which brings forth the fact that he was a passionate fighter for the establishment of socialism; many of the male protagonist's actions and discursive constructions are taken from the writer's own life and experience (Knigh 2001, 356).

In light of this hypothesis, the strategy of manipulating the reader is quite simple: it relies primarily on the unconscious identification with the protagonist, a process which occurs more easily when the image constructed in the novel corresponds more closely to the entrenched images and stereotypes of the time. In this sense, making use of Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, Philippe Julien theorizes the ego formation, pointing out this emerges through identification with the image of the Other, thus, with an outside image (Julien 1996, 34). Julien also argues that the process of identification with the other will inevitably bring forth a tension born from the fact that the identifying image triggers both a sense of attraction and repulsion. When talking about the identifying image we refer to the object (either an image in painting or a character in the case of literature) which has the ability to trigger the reader's/viewer's aesthetic tension. This tension will only favor the identification.<sup>3</sup> Thus, assuming that the immediate intentionality of the text is that of convincing the readers on the benefits and need to establish socialism, and that in order for manipulation to occur the discourse has to be constructed following certain stereotypical patterns generally accepted and perceived as being normal, we can conclude that socialism is the one essentially operating the same imaginary projections and the same social roles when it comes to the feminine aspect.

Thus, from a feminist perspective we move on to a Marxist approach. The Marxist method requires the studying of social roles and cultural codes that work together in organizing the fictional world of the novel. The images from *The Iron Heel* are constructed around primordial visual images such as the myth of the absolute hero (with all its corresponding items: the adventure, the battle, the salvation of the entire community) or the myth of rebellion against the system. This constant appeal to myth is not centered around the belief that by "living the myths, we, chronologically, leave behind the profane time, and enter a different qualitative time, a sacred time, both primordial as well as infinitely recoverable" (Eliade 1978, 18), but rather around an ideological purpose. Political myths are constructed using the same techniques as in the case of archaic myths due to the fact that, according to Raoul Girardet, "they are characterized by the same essential fluidity and inaccurate outlines" (Girardet 1977, 3).

Both the archaic myths, as well as the political ones appeal to the same unconscious impulse, and in addition, as explained by Claude Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss 1971, 560), follow the same pattern. At this point, it is important to bring into discussion the hypothesis of the two levels: the structural level of the myth is based on a foundation common to all myths and it has a perpetual resilience, while the probabilistic level needs to be approved, certified and validated, also proving to be extremely variable, in accordance with the variability of successive narrators. Thus, paraphrasing Strauss, there is a mythical latency within each individual, the myth being an image of the world subscribed to the spirit's archetype. This perspective offers fertile ground for interpreting the role of mythization in the novel: as far as the content level is concerned, the emphasis is placed on the myth's structural level, present in the collective imaginary as a picture frame overlapped by the male character's image, image which is validated and certified by appealing to the archetype. The character is portrayed as being the *providential man*, *the Savior*, a posture meant to play with the implicit reader's expectations, projections and complexes. This identification of the character with the Hero, the Savior follows the same pattern discussed by Raoul Girardet in the above quoted volume (Girardet 1977, 56). This process traces the way in which an image is mythized, heroified and transferred from the present reality to an imaginary, mythical one. The author identifies three successive moments, necessary for the heroization process to take place: firstly, there is a time of expectancy and summoning, a time when the expectations, hopes and nostalgia regarding the emergence of this figure are formed (the moments in which the image of the male hero is somehow drawn in his absence, from the other characters' discussion, as well as from his own writings); afterwards, there is a time of presence, during which the deliberate manipulation plays an increasingly important role (manipulation which is mainly achieved through discourse); and finally, a time of recollection, during which the vision regarding the image of the Savior image becomes a retrospective one, permanently adjustable to "the vagaries of memory, with its selective mechanisms, its repressions and its exaggerations" (Ibid.). Furthermore, Girardet constructs four models of leaders. The first one is that of Cincinnatus—the prototype of the leader that becomes distinguishable through firmness, experience, prudence, cold blood, and moderation (the main values of this legendary type are those of protective continuity and stability). Within the second model, the leader is characterized by *the outburst of an immediate action*. This type of leader is portrayed by Alexander, the symbol of adventure, of exuberant youth that holds the sword, vanquishing and conquering. A third depiction of leadership is embodied by Solon, who plays the role of the creator of a new world, of founding father. The fourth embodies the general will, guiding and being in turn guided by a sacred impulse which is transformed into historical destiny. Within the protagonist's image one can identify characteristics and constants from all the four models of leaders. The central male character is the prophet who, guided by superior moral values and adopting principles such as determination and prudence wants to establish a new social destiny. This identification functions as a principle of embodiment, of assuming an already glorified personality, thus assuring the success of the mythized character. We are left however with the question regarding how much of this heroified construct is a conscious one, following a manipulative and propagandistic purpose.

In the perspective of a subversive and manipulative discourse, the choice for a different narrative voice in the footnotes appears to emphasize further the credibility of the work, offering, at the same time, ideological accuracy. Anthony Meredith, the voice of the narrator present in the footnotes, possesses a historical and critical perspective over Avis's discourse. Ironically, at times, he portrays Ernest not as the Hero, the Savior who sacrificed himself for the community, but as one of the leaders who fought for socialism. So, this writing technique meant to symbolically give History back to the reader, by diminishing the protagonist's image to *one of*, becomes essential. Just as Roland Barthes argues, "Myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History. In it, history evaporates. It is a kind of ideal servant: it prepares all things, brings them, lays them out, the master arrives, it silently disappears: all that is left for one to do is to enjoy this beautiful object without wondering where it comes from" (Barthes 1991, 152). The implicit reader is able to choose the perspective which best suits his own identification constants, his own expectations and comprehensive potentialities. However, this narrative perspective maintains the same intentionality as the mythized one: to prepare the collective psyche for ideology. By using this second character-narrator, the author no longer appeals to the myth, but to a so-called history—the passing of time offered Meredith the perspective of the successful revolution.

As far as the third methodology is concerned, we start from the premise according to which *The Iron Heel* has indeed a social role, supporting integration processes and the development of a social identity. The implicit reader must be drawn, caught within the utopian projection, and brought to the point of integrating himself/herself and of developing his/her own social identity. This as *The Iron Heel* is a book wrote in the summer of 1906 (and published in 1908), a period during which socialist ideas cease to be a marginal doctrine, *a club ideology* (Touchard 1958, 716), and start to spread through broad revolutionary movements. Immediately after The Cold War, the historical reality is marked by the emergence of a true overflow of trade unions and worker activism. Hundreds of thousands of workers go on strikes, advocating for easier working conditions, for shortening the working day and inalienable rights such as life, liberty and the full benefit of their labor. According to Philip Jenkins, in 1872, 100.000 workers went on strike in New York for the eight-hour workday, followed in later years by other violent events which resulted in many casualties and property damage (in 1886 the number of strikes nationwide reached a historical peak of 1400) (Jenkins 2003, 179). Workers organized themselves into federations and unions (Knights of Labor, National Labor Federation, Western Federation of Miners) which represented a real progressive force (in 1905 the number of union members reached two million people).

The above-mentioned movements faced intense opposition from the state and corporations, employers ending up forming, according to Philip Jenkins, their own paramilitary forces aimed at controlling the industrial population and suppressing strikes, a reality accepted by most American legislations. Consequently, "the American labor disputes before the 1930's were marked by astonishing degrees of violence that often verged on civil war, and industrial conflict reached frightening dimensions in certain periods: 1876–1877, 1885–1886, 1892–1894 and 1912–1916" (Jenkins 2003, 179). According to the same source, in 1904 27.000 workers have died due to causes related to work conditions (Ibid., 178).

This brief overview of the historical reality of the time is meant to highlight the mimetic intentionality of London's book.<sup>4</sup> The writer uses the immediate reality (the status of workers, as well as the violent actions undertaken in order to obtain rights, are aspects thoroughly discussed in the novel), but he also succeeds in directly influencing it, by preparing the collective psyche for the battle aimed at establishing socialism and attaining a new world: "As both a novel and a concept, *The Iron Heel* played an important role in the culture of U.S radicalism in the first half of the twentieth century. The novel was very popular with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and other revolutionary socialist circles. To these groups, *The Iron Heel* was an entertaining educational tool as well as a theoretical critique of 'right-wing' or party socialists who believed that electoral politics could defeat capitalism" (Knigh 2001, 356).

To conclude, we have chosen to use these three methods in order to observe the way in which the novel is being configured from three different angles. The analysis underwent from the perspective of gender studies revealed the fact that London operates with certain prototypical social codes, placing the woman in the same posture of gentleness, protection and establishment, while the male protagonist is portrayed as the reformer and founder of a new social destiny, common to an entire community. From the point of view of cultural criticism we also saw that the male character's image (primarily the one wife Avis Ever embodies during the unfolding of the novel, and secondarily one embodied by the narrator's voice in the footnotes) is a mythicized and heroified one, transferred from the reality of the tale into a mythical space, worthy of legendary characters.

In the last part of our study, by confronting the data presented in the novel with the historical reality, we were able to establish similarities between Jack London's two planes of existence, proving at the same time that this utopian projection (or anti-utopian—as we have tried to show) is not only purely fictional, fulfilling an esthetic role. *The Iron Heel* can thus be considered a propagandistic type of work, one which transfers the writer's own beliefs and projections regarding the establishment of the proletariat into the land of fiction. The novel's construction pattern is thus meant to have a subversive purpose, an idea which suggests that beyond the seeming "masculinization" of women, proletarian ideology, diminishes the feminine to a stereotype, by associating it with the same submissive position towards the male instance.

Our brief venture into psychoanalysis proved that the reader's identification with an outside image is achieved by constructing the discourse on a pattern of prototypical images, while the perspective informed by cultural critique revealed the conscious or unconscious strategies of reader manipulation. If, on the one hand, the stake is placed on the construction of a mythicized image of the protagonist, the perspective frees itself from the myth, being placed within the sphere of a distanced, critical discourse towards the protagonist, which keeps the same utopian effervescence regarding socialist ideology. The reader has the possibility to choose the perspective which his unconscious considers best suited for its own identification constants.



## Notes

1. For an in-depth discussion of London's book we recommend Jonah Raskin, "The Iron Heel at 100: Jack London – The Artist as Antenna of the Race," *Monthly Review* (New York) 59, no.10 (Mar. 2008): 1-7.
2. For a study over the Marxism's reporting to sexuality and gender differences we recommend Saskia Poldervaart, "Theories About Sex and Sexuality in Utopian Socialism," *Journal of Homosexuality* (New York) 29, no. 2/3 (Sep. 1995): 41-68.
3. A very interesting study which uses as an epistemologic instrument the Freudian psychoanalysis and Jungian analytical psychology in interpreting the way of configuring symbolic geography is Corin Braga, "Psychoanalytical Geography," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* (Cluj-Napoca) 7, no. 20 (Summer 2008): 134-149.
4. For a closer discussion about the origins of marxism should be consulted Alexander Saxton, "Marxism, Labor, and the Failed Critique of Religion," *Science & Society* (New York) 70, no. 3 (Jul. 2006): 308-336.

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**Abstract**

**Gender, Power and Ideological Discourse: A Case Study**

The present study aims at exploring a proto-dystopia from the perspective of gender studies, cultural studies and the historical context in which it appeared. *The Iron Heel* (1908) represents a classic example of ideological writing, an expression of the author's political and existential beliefs, as well as a type of work that anticipates and influences real historical events. The present analysis is primarily concerned with formulating a diagnosis of the social codes and prototypical images of the time, identifying at the same time the conscious or unconscious strategies for the manipulation, indoctrination and persuasion of the reader.

**Keywords**

Jack London, ideology, Marxist utopia, gender differences, manipulation, history.