

Jack London: Double Trouble

By Jonah Raskin

Writers in America — perhaps more than anywhere else in the world — have long enjoyed “double consciousness” to borrow the phrase that the popular nineteenth-century American writer, Catherine Maria Sedgwick, uses in her autobiography, *The Power of Sympathy*. A literary gift, double consciousness enabled poets and novelists to explore hope and despair, the dream and the ashes in a nation half slave and half free for the first 125 years of its existence. Double consciousness enabled writers such as Catherine Sedgwick, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson and Mark Twain to explore the dualities of American life in cities and on the frontier, aboard the Pequod, and on the raft with Huck and Jim floating down the Mississippi.

Moreover, American writers, from Edgar Allan Poe in the 1839 short story, “William Wilson,” to Philip Roth in the 1993 novel, *Operation Shylock*, have also written about fictional doubles or *doppelgangers* — characters with lookalikes, twins, and impersonators. Jean Paul Richter, the German romantic writer, coined the term *doppelganger* in his 1796 novel, *Siebenkas*; it entered American English in 1851, the same year that Melville published *Moby-Dick*, and Hawthorne published *The House of the Seven Gables*. American authors have not had a monopoly on the concept of the *doppelganger* or the fictional double. In 1846, Dostoevsky published *The Double*, a novel in which the main character, Yakov Petrovich Golyadkin, is confronted by a facsimile of himself, but confident, extroverted and aggressive — the exact opposites of his own personality. Moreover, books about the double have been written by the likes of Otto Rank (*The Double: A Psychoanalytical Study*), Karl Miller (*Doubles: Studies in Literary History*) and Rodney Davies (*Doubles: The Enigma of the Second Self*).

No one, however, has explored and mapped Jack London’s double consciousness, doubles, and *doppelgangers*, not even Earle Labor, the dean of London studies and the author of *Jack London, An American Life* (2013), the most recent London biography and perhaps the definitive biography for our time. Still, Labor doesn’t capture the doubleness that defined London as lone wolf and member of the wolf pack who swung from hope to despair throughout his adult life, and especially from the start of his writing career in the late 1890s until his death in 1916.

Of course, we all have dualities. London had an extreme case. Doubleness stalked him at nearly every turn perhaps because he never knew the true identity of his own father and consequently often thought of himself as an orphan and a vagabond. Not surprisingly, he created a series of characters with opposing selves, whether Martin Eden in the novel of the same name or Saxon Brown in *The Valley of the Moon*. Buck, the civilized dog in *The Call of the Wild*, becomes a ferocious wolf and a “ghost” of himself in the arctic. In *White Fang* – the twin of *The Call of the Wild* – the ferocious wolf sheds his feral self and becomes a tame pup in sunny California. In the short story, “South of the Slot,” his main character is as a proper Berkeley professor engaged to a socialite and as a rambunctious San Francisco labor organizer in love with a working class woman. He has only to cross the Bay to change identities.

What makes London unique among writers is that he actual had a “Double,” as he dubbed him. Today, we might say that he suffered “identity theft” and that he had a stalker. The Double irritated and annoyed London, but he also recognized his literary possibilities. After all, he always referred to his “Double.”

London turned himself into an amateur detective and collected as many clues and as much information about his Double as he could. While very little is known about London’s double, he seems to have been a nobody who wanted to be somebody – like London himself who catapulted from obscurity to notoriety. For a decade, more than one individual impersonated London: forged checks as Jack London, borrowed books from public libraries as London, introduced himself at public events as London, and proposed marriage to women as Jack London. Still, he was never successful in his attempts to apprehend and come face-to-face with, him. He could not have created a more intriguing fictional character if he had tried, and, while he promised to write a full-length book about the man, he never did.

What seems likely is that London’s Double was unhappy with his little life, that he borrowed what he knew, or thought that he knew, about London —wealth, womanizing, voracious reading, and an investigative journalism – and created an ersatz life for himself. London’s Double suggests the dark side of celebrity culture and the fame industry.

Almost all of the information about his double or doubles comes from a dozen or so letters included in the three-volume, *Letters of Jack London*, published by Stanford - only a fraction of his total correspondence. These letters (and the footnotes by the editors) make

it clear that the men who were impersonating him were real and not figments of his fertile imagination, as some readers of London's work have suggested. (London used both lower and upper case when he spelled the word Double; he also sometimes put it in quotation marks, as though he wasn't quite sure what to make of the fellow or how to characterize and label him.)

On June 13, 1906, at the age of 30, he noted, "I undoubtedly have a double impersonating me." Two weeks later, he observed with a sense of added frustration that, "this double of mine is always getting me into trouble." A man calling himself Jack London was apparently courting a Mrs. Stenberg in Sacramento. London didn't write directly to her, but to a friend of hers, Mrs. Madge Selinger in Fresno. "I am the real Jack London," he insisted. At first, he didn't quite believe that he had an impersonator. In his letter to Mrs. Selinger, he added, "Was this all a concoction of yours, or did you really know some fellow who claimed that he was Jack London?" Neither Mrs. Stenberg nor Mrs. Selinger could provide help.

The first week of October 1906, he again complained and with more irritation: "I don't know how to go about running this imposter down." By the end of the month, he wrote, this time with a certain amusement, that his "Double has appeared in Billings, Montana." He certainly got around. For a spell, the Double disappeared, or at least maintained a low profile. In 1911, his Double popped up again, though a man whose real name was James A. Edwards was also arrested for impersonating London and forging checks in his name. That arrest, however, didn't stop the Double or Doubles. One of them apparently showed up in Mexico during the revolution, though it's also possible that U.S. newspapers simply made up the story.

On February 25, 1911, the *Boston Journal* published a story that claimed London had joined Pancho Villa's army and had been wounded and then captured by government troops. A headline in the *Phoenix Evening Post* claimed, "Jack London at Rebels Head Arouses Diaz." A Chicago newspaper announced, "Jack London An Insurrecto [sic]." London was safely at home in Glen Ellen with his wife, Charmian, but the reports were credible because he had published an open letter to his "Dear comrades in the Mexican Revolution" in which he stated, "We socialists, anarchists, hobos, chicken thieves, outlaws and undesirable citizens of the United States, are with you heart and soul in your effort to overthrow slavery and autocracy in Mexico." Not surprisingly, London Doubleness prompted him to change his mind about the Mexican revolution and to support the United States when American troops

invaded the country. "Civilization introduced by America and Europe is being destroyed," he lamented. "Big brother can police, organize and manage Mexico."

In the fall of 1911, an impersonator showed up near the town of Alma in Santa Clara country. London asked Harry Ryan, an old friend who lived near-by, to "inquire around and see if you can find out if a hatter, by the name of Jack London was not around Alma." (He surely meant a "mad hatter.") By the middle of October 1911, he learned that the Double had been spotted in Washington State and that his family – real or fictitious - lived in San Francisco, though he wasn't able to pinpoint his exact address. Two years later, the Double showed up at a location in the mountains of Santa Cruz known as "Call of the Wild." In fact, "Call of the Wild" is the official name of a place that's recorded in the Santa Clara County Assessor's map. Life imitated London's art.

In a letter to his German translator, Ernest Untermann, about the Santa Cruz appearance of his Double, London noted, "A double of mine, evidently a Jew, gets there occasionally" though he never explained why he believed he was Jewish. In April 1914, eight months after a fire that destroyed his mansion, Wolf House, he told Edgar G. Sisson, the managing editor of *Collier's Magazine*, that he had been "pestered by 'doubles' from the beginning" of his literary career and that he wanted to write 50,000 on the subject. He didn't say whether the work would be fiction or non-fiction. "I assure you it will be very human, intensely interesting, and most sensational," he told Sisson, as though he had the plot and the main character figured out. On April 17, 1914, Sisson replied, "When war's alarms die down the 'doubles' suggestion is apt to have much interest for us. Will you revert to it when the right time comes?"

We can only imagine the book he might have written: perhaps about a famous writer who led a double life, half in shadow, half in the sun, a public personality with a secret self he carried with him. No one knew Jack and his own dualities better than he. "I was naturally reticent concerning my real self," he explained. "No intimacies, a continuous hardening, a superficial loquacity so clever, and an inner reticence so secret that the one was taken for real, and the other never dreamed of."

In 1915, he still had the Double very much on his mind. On February 4, he wrote angrily to the actor, director, and screenwriter, Romaine Fielding, "Whenever you meet a 'double' of mine, knock his block off for me, will you please." London surely would have liked to

knock his block off himself, either by writing about him or by literally punching him in the face; he was known to do that to men, too. When London died in 1916, the Double apparently died with him. After all, it was pointless to impersonate the famous author when he was no longer alive and in public view entertaining the world with his books, his extravagant life style, and his outlandish opinions about everything and everyone from the Mexican revolution to Edith Wharton and Rudyard Kipling. The day before he died – perhaps of natural causes, perhaps an intentional suicide - he wrote to his older daughter, Joan, to invite her and her sister, Bess, to lunch with him in Oakland and sail on Lake Merritt. “If weather is not good, we can go to a matinee,” he suggested. “Let me know at once.” The man who wanted “Big Brother” to mangle Mexico, who called himself “Wolf,” and who closed letters to “comrades” with the phrase, “Yours for the Revolution,” signed his last letter to his daughter, “Daddy.”

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