

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Sea-Wolf (Unabridged) by Jack London

Book Information

Jack London, The Sea-Wolf (Unabridged)
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Interest Level: UG

When Humphrey Van Weyden finds himself sailing to Japan aboard the "Ghost," he has to face weeks of brutality at the hands of Captain Wolf Larsen, until he decides to take desperate measures to save himself and the rest of the crew.

Award: NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Natural Environments, Oceans; People, Slaves; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Popular Groupings, Upper Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; Transportation/Vehicles, Ships/Boats

Main Characters

Humphrey Van Weyden the main character, who learns to be strong and self-reliant during the fateful sea journey

Leach & Johnson two proud and mutinous crew members of the "Ghost" who are lost at sea

Maud Brewster a writer traveling to Japan who is shipwrecked and rescued by the "Ghost"; she falls in love with Humphrey Van Weyden

Thomas Mugridge (Cooky) the cook of the "Ghost" whose disregard for hygiene disgusts the crew

Wolf Larsen the captain of the "Ghost," who is feared and loathed by everyone

Vocabulary

boom a long pole or beam which extends the bottom of a sail

Cockney a person from London's eastern section

forecastle the upper deck of a ship located behind the bow

holluschickie young bachelor seals

steerage the part of the ship where passengers are housed

the poop (deck) a deck located at the stern of a ship

windlass a winch-like machine used to lift objects

Synopsis

Jack London's novel, *The Sea Wolf*, focuses on a brief period in the lives of a privileged young literary critic, a successful writer, and a belligerent and imposing sea captain after fate brings them together on a sailing schooner called "Ghost."

The young critic, Humphrey Van Weyden, encounters Wolf Larsen, captain of the "Ghost," after a shipwreck in the fog-shrouded waters off the California coast.

Upon boarding the "Ghost," Humphrey almost immediately becomes the object of Wolf's ridicule because of his easy lifestyle and scarecrow appearance. Wolf forces Humphrey to work as cabin-boy and later as mate, which, to his surprise, eventually helps him become a stronger person.

During his forced stay on the "Ghost," Humphrey witnesses the many moods of Wolf Larsen. At times, Wolf conducts intelligent philosophical discussions with Humphrey. However, he also frequently explodes in violence, and it is this side of the captain that Humphrey and all of the other crew members fear.

As Humphrey becomes more of an integral part of the crew, he laments the fact that he is also becoming as brutish as the others. His downward descent seems to change, though, when Maud Brewster comes on board, and he recognizes her as a famous writer whose work he has admired. While assuming the role of her protector, Humphrey falls in love with her.

After witnessing more than enough of Wolf's brutality, Humphrey and Maud desert the "Ghost" for the coast of Japan. They end up on an island where they must make preparations for the approaching

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winter. While there, Maud has a premonition that something is coming, and soon thereafter, Wolf and the disabled "Ghost" land on their island. Wolf is obviously in ill health and has become blind. Humphrey takes advantage of his diminished condition and makes the repairs necessary to get the schooner seaworthy again.

Humphrey and Maud finally leave their island, which they have named Endeavor Island, in hopes of finding the Japanese mainland. Wolf, who is near death from what he diagnosis as cancer or a brain tumor, is comforted by Humphrey and Maud, despite how badly he has treated them. He dies and is buried at sea. The story then ends as Humphrey spots a United States revenue cutter on the horizon.

Although Wolf Larsen is much maligned by Humphrey and all those whose lives he entered, Humphrey does realize that Wolf was largely responsible for helping him to "stand on his own legs," and for that he is grateful.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

What is Wolf Larsen's relationship with Maud Brewster?

Wolf apparently has romantic designs on Maud since he tries to attack her on the "Ghost." Wolf is most likely attracted to her intellect and frailty. Maud fears him but, despite this, desires to care for him as his health quickly deteriorates in the end. It is almost as if she is caring for a dangerous but injured animal, as she does not seem to hold Wolf responsible for his past actions.

Literary Analysis

While Humphrey and Maud are preparing to spend winter on Endeavor Island, Maud has a premonition that, "something is coming here, to us I don't know what, but it is coming." She goes on to say she does not know if it will be good or bad. What actually happens, and do you think it is good or bad? Explain your answer.

It turns out to be the landing of Wolf Larsen in the disabled "Ghost." This occurrence initially seems bad since Wolf cannot be trusted. However, his incapacitating illness allows Humphrey to repair the ship so that they are all able to escape the island. As Wolf becomes worse, both Humphrey and Maud are able to comfort him in his final hours, which reaffirms their own sense of humanity.

Inferential Comprehension

At the end of chapter 29, Humphrey realizes that not only has he come to stand on his own legs, but that he is able to take care of someone else as well. Give at least four examples from the story that show how Humphrey has become more self-reliant and capable.

Possible answers could include the following: Humphrey sails the small boat to escape the "Ghost"; he takes care of Maud on the island; he starts a fire on the island using only gun powder and debris; he clubs the seals to make a roof for their shelter; and he puts a new mast, sails, and rigging on the "Ghost" to make her sailable.

Constructing Meaning

Jack London chose to name his novel *The Sea Wolf*, probably referring to Wolf Larsen. In what ways is Wolf Larsen like a wolf?

Wolf Larsen's physical appearance is imposing. He is large, strong, and possesses "gray and cold and harsh" eyes. At times he seems to stalk people, preying on their frailties for his own delight and pleasure. His mood can change without warning from civil to beastly. He views himself as a predator and lives by "survival of the fittest" philosophy.

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Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization Like the mate he buries at sea in the beginning of *The Sea Wolf*, Wolf Larsen goes to his own watery grave without a proper burial service. Have your students compose an appropriate eulogy for Wolf Larsen based on the events of the story, and ask volunteers to read their eulogies to the rest of the class.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Jack London has carefully written *The Sea Wolf* with accurate terminology concerning the schooner, "Ghost," and the art of sailing. Have your students research the schooner and its features. Then have them draw a picture of one in which they accurately label its features.

Extending Meaning *The Sea Wolf* tells of the journey of the "Ghost," a schooner that leaves the California coast for the seal-hunting waters of the Pacific near Japan. Have your students plot the probable course of the "Ghost" on a map or globe. Ask them to find the 44th parallel; Yokohama, Japan; and the Bering Sea. Then have them locate an island off Japan's coast that could serve as Endeavor Island. Ask them to identify the island's latitude and longitude.

Making Predictions Humphrey attributes much of his growth as a person during the course of the story to Wolf Larsen. Ask your students to reflect on Wolf Larsen's influence on Humphrey, and then have them write a summary in which they tell what Humphrey would be like if he became a sea captain.