

The Sea-Wolf



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JACK LONDON

Jack London was born in the San Francisco Bay Area and lived with his mother and stepfather. He came from a working-class background and was mostly self-taught, taking an early interest in Victorian novels. London worked various seafaring jobs, including as an “oyster pirate” (a poacher of oysters) and on a seal-hunting schooner called the *Sophie Sutherland*. In 1897, he traveled to the Yukon region of Alaska to participate in the Klondike Gold Rush. Though he didn’t strike it rich, the experience inspired him to write his famous short story, “To Build a Fire,” which was first published in 1902. As London began his career as a writer, he took an increasing interest in socialism and was active in American socialist political parties. As a novelist, London was critically and commercially successful. His most well-known novels include [The Call of the Wild](#), [White Fang](#), *The Sea-Wolf*, *The Iron Heel*, and *Martin Eden*, and he also wrote short stories, journalism, plays, and memoirs. London died on his porch at age 40. Though scholars debate London’s exact cause of death, he had been ill with numerous diseases he contracted throughout his travels, and he also suffered from alcoholism. His ashes were buried on his Glen Ellen, California, property, which has since become the Jack London State Historic Park.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Sea-Wolf was inspired in part by real historical events and Jack London’s own experiences at sea. London claimed that the character of Wolf Larsen was based on a real sailor named Captain Alex MacLean, who was also known for his cruelty. Although Wolf Larsen is the novel’s antagonist, he also shares many qualities with London himself. Like Wolf, London went seal-hunting off the coast of Japan, and he was also well-read, a self-taught sailor, an atheist, and even nicknamed “Wolf” by his friends. The ferry wreck at the beginning of the story was likely inspired by a real wreck. In 1901, two ferries, the *Sausalito*, and the *San Rafael*, collided in the San Francisco Bay; the disaster became the bay’s worst ferryboat collision in history. More generally, *The Sea-Wolf* was inspired by the poor labor conditions that London witnessed, particularly in San Francisco, where people at the bottom of the hierarchy often had to work long hours at hard jobs.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

London references many of the literary works that inspired *The Sea-Wolf* in the book itself. Perhaps the most important

inspiration is Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin’s writings inspired a movement called Social Darwinism. The movement attempted to apply biological principles of “survival of the fittest” and natural selection to human interactions. Although contemporary scholars dismiss Social Darwinism as pseudoscience, it was popular in the late-1800s and early-1900s, and readers of *The Sea-Wolf* may observe the movement’s core ideas in the philosophy of Captain Wolf Larsen. Wolf Larsen also bears a resemblance to the character of Satan in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Like Wolf Larsen, Milton’s Satan is one of Western literature’s famed individualists—and, in *The Sea-Wolf*, Maud Brewster even compares Wolf to Milton’s Satan. By 1904, when *The Sea-Wolf* was published, sea adventure novels were already a well-established genre, with some of the most famous examples including Herman Melville’s [Moby-Dick](#) and Robert Louis Stevenson’s [Treasure Island](#).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Sea-Wolf
- **When Written:** 1903
- **Where Written:** San Francisco
- **When Published:** 1904
- **Literary Period:** Realism, Naturalism
- **Genre:** Adventure Novel
- **Setting:** The Pacific Ocean between San Francisco and Japan
- **Climax:** Humphrey Van Weyden barely survives Wolf Larsen’s final attempt to kill him.
- **Antagonist:** Wolf Larsen
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Ahead of His Time. Though Jack London is perhaps best remembered for his adventure stories, some of his stories could be classified as science fiction, making him an early writer in the genre.

Jack in the Boxcar. While Jack London sometimes exaggerated stories of his childhood poverty, it is true that he lived as a “railroad tramp” for a time, and he was even jailed for a month due to vagrancy.



PLOT SUMMARY

On a passenger ship off the coast of San Francisco, the wealthy intellectual and literary critic (and the book’s narrator) Humphrey Van Weyden is on his way to visit a friend. Suddenly,

however, foggy conditions cause the passenger ship to collide with another ship, and Van Weyden's ship begins to sink. Van Weyden, who can't swim, is adrift at sea until Wolf Larsen, the captain of a **seal**-hunting vessel called the *Ghost* that is headed for hunting grounds in the waters near Japan, stumbles across Van Weyden and brings him aboard his ship.

Van Weyden passes out from exhaustion. When he wakes up, he's wearing new clothes, and the sailor Johnson and the cook Thomas Mugridge are caring for him. He goes to Wolf Larsen and offers to pay a large sum of money for Wolf to turn the vessel back toward San Francisco. Wolf Larsen, however, refuses the offer, and forces Van Weyden to join the crew of the *Ghost* as a cabin boy instead.

As a gentleman who hasn't ever had to work, Van Weyden struggles to adjust to life on the *Ghost* at first. He is bad at the tasks assigned to him, and soon after starting work, he injures his knee. At one point, however, he happens to be in Wolf Larsen's room and notices that the fearsome captain has a surprisingly large collection of books, including works by William Shakespeare, Edgar Allan Poe, and Charles Darwin. Darwin in particular seems to be an influence on Wolf Larsen and his methods of leadership—he frequently implements his own version of Darwin's concept of "survival of the fittest" by pitting crew members against one another or by forcing crew members to undertake dangerous tasks to prove their toughness.

Despite Wolf Larsen's cruelty, he and Van Weyden have some surprising similarities. Wolf Larsen enjoys discussing philosophy with Van Weyden, even though they disagree on important issues, such as the existence of an immortal soul (Van Weyden believes humans have souls, but Wolf Larsen doesn't). However, Wolf Larsen's outbursts of violence and cruelty often follow these periods of friendliness, reflecting Wolf's temperamental mood.

At one point during stormy weather off the coast of Japan, the *ghost* encounters a small boat in need of rescue that contains four engineers and a poet named Maud Brewster who is not a sailor and was only traveling for her health. Although Brewster is an unusual presence on the *Ghost*, where there are no other women, Wolf Larsen seems to enjoy discussing philosophy with her and Van Weyden, at least on days when he's in a good mood.

During seal-hunting season, Wolf Larsen gets into a competition with his brother, Death Larsen, who has a reputation for being even more ruthless a leader than Wolf. This competition seems to excite Wolf, and after initial aggression from Death, Wolf responds by stealing several of Death's boats and capturing some of his hunters.

The evening after his victory, Wolf Larsen is in a good mood, but things take a turn when Van Weyden witnesses Wolf assaulting Maud Brewster. This motivates Brewster and Van

Weyden to steal a boat and escape. They hope to make it to Japan, but an unfavorable **wind** pulls them toward an abandoned island that they call Endeavor Island.

Van Weyden and Maud Brewster spend several weeks alone on the island. Their circumstances force them to learn new survival skills, and they bond over the experience. Van Weyden loves Maud Brewster, but he keeps his feelings to himself. One day, Van Weyden is surprised to see that the *Ghost* has landed off the coast of Endeavor Island.

Van Weyden works up the courage to explore the *Ghost* and finds that most of its crew is gone—the only person left is Wolf Larsen, who has been marooned after Death Larsen tracked him down and offered better pay to Wolf's crew. In addition, Wolf Larsen is blind and in failing health. Maud Brewster and Van Weyden hatch a plan to repair the *Ghost* (which had its sails cut) and escape, but even in his blind, ailing state, Wolf Larsen resists their efforts and tries to stop them.

Ultimately, however, despite Wolf Larsen's resistance, Van Weyden and Brewster manage to repair the *Ghost* and use it to escape the island. Though Van Weyden has many opportunities to kill Wolf, he chooses to spare his life. Wolf's health continues to decline until he is paralyzed and on the verge of death. Wolf remains defiant to his last breath, even when he can barely communicate. He dies from his ailment in the middle of a violent storm, and Van Weyden and Maud bury him at sea. Soon after, a U.S. ship encounters Van Weyden and Brewster and sends over a rescue boat to retrieve them. Before the ship can reach them, Weyden asks to kiss Brewster.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Humphrey Van Weyden – Humphrey Van Weyden, the narrator of *The Sea-Wolf*, is a wealthy intellectual and literary critic in his thirties who. After a ferry collision leaves Van Weyden stranded at sea, Wolf Larsen, the fearsome **seal**-hunting captain of the *Ghost*, rescues Van Weyden, forcing him to join the *Ghost*'s. Eventually, Van Weyden falls in love with Maud Brewster, a poet Wolf Larson also rescues from a wreck and forces to stay aboard his ship. At the beginning of the story, Van Weyden isn't used to hard, physical labor—he has notably soft hands, which contrast with the calloused hands of the sailors around him. He begins at the lowliest position on the *Ghost*, forced to take orders even from the cook, Thomas Mugridge. As time passes, however, Van Weyden becomes more skilled as a sailor and more confident in his abilities. Van Weyden has a strange relationship with Wolf Larsen. While Larsen's masculinity, strength, and surprisingly large collection of books fascinate Van Weyden, he's immensely fearful of Larsen's unpredictable bad moods. By the end of the book, the relationship between Van Weyden and Wolf Larsen has

become openly adversarial, with Larsen trying to kill Van Weyden. Despite Larsen's actions, though, Van Weyden refuses to kill an unarmed Wolf Larsen when he has the chance. Despite learning self-reliance from Larsen, Van Weyden never assumes Larsen's level of viciousness. The book ends with Van Weyden using all the skills and ingenuity he's learned as a sailor to survive on a small island with Maud Brewster, which ultimately leads to their rescue from a passing vessel. Van Weyden represents how the wealthy can be disconnected with the rest of the world and the difficult work performed by the working class, but he also represents the capacity of people to change and adapt to their circumstances.

Wolf Larsen – The story's antagonist, Wolf Larsen is the captain of a **seal**-hunting vessel called the *Ghost*. He rescues Humphrey Van Weyden after spotting him adrift in the sea following a ferry wreck, then he forces Van Weyden to stay aboard the *Ghost* and work as a cabin boy. Wolf Larsen is powerfully built and handsome. The novel never mentions his real name—everyone refers to him by the nickname “Wolf,” just as they refer to his brother (and rival) by the nickname “Death” Larsen. Wolf Larsen is largely self-taught, both at sea where he started out as a cabin boy and in the arts and sciences (he is well-read and keeps a large collection of books in his cabin.) One of Wolf Larsen's defining characteristics is his temperamental personality. At times, he is a gracious host to Van Weyden, capable of holding long philosophical discussions. At other times, however, he is cruel and even murderous. Wolf Larsen is a big believer in Charles Darwin's concept of “survival of the fittest”—he frequently instigates conflict among his crew to weed out weak crew members. At times, though, Wolf seems to enjoy cruelty for its own sake. Wolf Larsen is also noteworthy for his committed belief in materialism, the idea that there's no such thing as eternal life. Wolf's materialism puts him at odds with Maud Brewster and Van Weyden, who both believe in idealism and the existence of immortal souls. Though Wolf Larsen's uncompromising methods as a leader initially instill fear in his subordinates, by the end of the story, his whole crew abandons him, and his health rapidly declines. Even in his illness, however, Wolf remains vicious and uncompromising—when Van Weyden tries to steal the *Ghost*, for instance, Wolf Larsen tries to kill him. Wolf Larsen is a complex, morally ambiguous character. On the one hand, he represents the appeal of self-reliance and the power of strength and fear. On the other hand, his demise illustrates the limits of these philosophies, which can sometimes lead to misery and loneliness.

Maud Brewster – Maud Brewster is a poet. Wolf Larsen rescues her after a shipwreck leaves her stranded at sea, then he forces her to stay on his vessel, the *Ghost*. Brewster soon becomes the love interest of Humphrey Van Weyden, a literary critic who is familiar with Brewster's work, and who is also an unwilling passenger on the *Ghost*. The presence of a woman on

board the *Ghost* is unusual, but although Wolf Larsen can be a cruel leader, he is often a surprisingly courteous host to Maud Brewster, holding long philosophical discussions with her and Van Weyden about the existence of the soul. One night, however, Wolf assaults Brewster, and soon after, she and Van Weyden steal a small boat to escape. Bad **wind** takes them to a small, deserted island that they name Endeavour Island. Though Brewster comes from a wealthy background, the harsh circumstances on the island force her to develop new survival skills, and she often surprises Van Weyden with her strength and determination. Their experience on the island helps the two of them grow closer together. Unlike Wolf Larsen, whose “survival of the fittest” instincts drive him to behave cruelly and immorally, the character of Maud Brewster suggests that it is possible to hold on to morality and culture even in life-or-death circumstances.

Death Larsen – Death Larsen is the brother of the **seal**-hunting captain Wolf Larsen and is reportedly even more ruthless in his methods as a leader. He is captain of the *Macedonia* (likely a reference to the famous Macedonian general, Alexander the Great). Though Death Larsen never appears as a character in the book, he sends his crew to harass Wolf's crew and claim the seal-hunting grounds for themselves. Wolf responds by sending out his own crew to capture Death's hunters and hunting boats. Though Wolf is initially successful, Death eventually tracks down Wolf, offers Wolf's crew better pay, and leaves Wolf marooned alone on the *Ghost*. Death Larsen shows how in a survival-of-the-fittest system, the most vicious competitor will usually win, and he represents the person Wolf might have become if he had never read books or studied philosophy.

Thomas Mugridge – Thomas Mugridge is the cook and one of the lowest-ranking sailors on Wolf Larsen's vessel, the *Ghost*. He is noteworthy for having a Cockney accent (associated with a working-class area of London). Mugridge is initially in charge of introducing Humphrey Van Weyden to life on the *Ghost*, and he treats Van Weyden cruelly, giving Van Weyden the worst tasks and stealing all his money. Soon, however, Van Weyden rises through the ranks, sending Mugridge back to the bottom. The other sailors don't respect Mugridge, and they often beat him. Mugridge illustrates how people who receive cruel treatment can turn cruel themselves.

George Leach – George Leach is a young sailor on Wolf Larsen's vessel the *Ghost*. He becomes dissatisfied with life aboard the *Ghost*, particularly after witnessing Johnson be severely beaten. Eventually, he and Johnson attempt a mutiny against Wolf Larsen, but it fails. Leach and Johnson try to escape, but Wolf Larsen catches them, leaving them behind to die at sea.

Johnson – Johnson is a sailor on Wolf Larsen's vessel, the *Ghost*. Unlike Johansen, Johnson is not loyal to Wolf and even attempts a mutiny with George Leach. Though Wolf does not

immediately kill Johnson and Leach after the mutiny, he eventually leaves them behind to die at sea, illustrating the consequences of crossing Wolf Larsen.

Johansen – Johansen is a sailor on Wolf Larsen’s vessel, the *Ghost*. He is of Scandinavian heritage. When Humphrey Van Weyden joins the *Ghost*, the previous mate has just died, and Johansen has received a promotion to fill his role. Johansen remains loyal to Wolf Larsen until near the end, unlike Johnson, who attempts a mutiny with George Leach earlier in the book. Johansen represents how people can get ahead by going along with cruelty rather than trying to resist it.

The Red-Faced Man – The red-faced man is a passenger on the same ship as Humphrey Van Weyden that sinks off the coast of San Francisco. He is much more experienced on the sea than Van Weyden, and his expertise helps highlight just how much of a novice at sea Van Weyden is at the beginning of the book.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Louis – Louis is a sailor from Nova Scotia who works on Wolf Larsen’s vessel, the *Ghost*. A friendly and talkative man, Louis’s main role in the story is to explain things to the narrator, Humphrey Van Weyden, who is new to life at sea.

however, Van Weyden never goes as far as Wolf Larsen—at the end of the book, when Van Weyden has a chance to shoot an unarmed Wolf Larsen, he chooses not to do so, even though he knows Wolf Larsen would shoot him if their roles were reversed. This demonstrates how, as Van Weyden nears the end of his journey to maturation, he has learned to step beyond the teachings of his mentor and truly stand on his own. The journey of personal growth that Van Weyden undergoes in *The Sea-Wolf* shows how a person needs self-reliance to survive in a cruel world. At the same time, though, the book also suggests that maturation can also involve a loss of innocence—and even an embrace of cynicism, as embodied by Wolf Larsen and his melancholy moods.



MATERIALISM VS. IDEALISM

At the heart of Jack London’s *The Sea-Wolf* is a conflict between the materialism of the fearsome captain Wolf Larsen and the idealism of his captives, the literary critic Humphrey Van Weyden and the poet Maud Brewster. In the book, *materialism* refers not to the selfish pursuit of material wealth, but to a philosopher theory that the material world is all that exists. As a materialist thinker, Wolf Larsen is essentially an atheist who doesn’t believe in souls or eternal life—rather, he believes that the observable world is all there is and all there ever will be. By contrast, Maud Brewster’s more closely align with philosophical idealism, which means that she does believe in souls and seems to be a committed Christian. Throughout the book, Wolf Larsen and Maud Brewster frequently argue about whether or not souls exist, and none of their debates ever has a clear winner.

Though Humphrey Van Weyden’s beliefs more closely align with Maud Brewster’s idealism, in many ways. Van Weyden’s philosophical stance falls somewhere between materialism and idealism. For instance, when Wolf Larsen and Maud Brewster are arguing about what causes humans to act as they do (Wolf suggests that desire drives action, while Maud suggests that soul drives action) Van Weyden proposes a compromise by saying that desire and the soul are just two ways of looking at the same thing. Ultimately, London seems to suggest that the extreme materialism of Wolf Larsen leads to misery, as Wolf suffers from a secret affliction throughout the book and ultimately dies, weakened and alone. Nevertheless, Wolf makes some powerful challenges to Van Weyden and Maud’s ideas, raising philosophical objections and, when that doesn’t work, sometimes resorting to physical violence. Ultimately, though, the back-and-forth nature of the conflict between Wolf’s materialism and Van Weyden and Maud’s idealism suggests that a full understanding of human nature requires elements of both materialism and idealism.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



SELF-RELIANCE AND MATURATION

Jack London’s *The Sea-Wolf* is the story of a rich intellectual named Humphrey Van Weyden who, over the course of a long stay on a seal-hunting vessel called the *Ghost*, learns how to do the hard manual labor that working on a ship requires. Though many of the new skills Van Weyden learns are physical, perhaps even more significant is the mental change that occurs in him as he learns how to better survive in the world without the help of others. Van Weyden’s mentor for many of these lessons is Wolf Larsen, the ship’s fearsome but surprisingly well-read captain. Wolf Larsen alternates between praising Van Weyden and treating him cruelly, all supposedly with the goal of helping Van Weyden to “stand on [his] own legs” instead of the “dead man’s legs” of his wealthy father, who provided Van Weyden with an inheritance that ensured Van Weyden didn’t have to work.

While Van Weyden becomes more self-reliant over the course of the book, he also becomes more comfortable with violence, at one point personally clubbing several small **seals**. Crucially,



SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

In Jack London's *The Sea-Wolf*, the fierce seal-hunting captain Wolf Larsen is surprisingly well read for such a tough sailor, and one of the authors on his shelf is Charles Darwin. In the late 19th century to early 20th century (around when Jack London wrote *The Sea-Wolf*), there was a movement called Social Darwinism, which sought to apply Charles Darwin's biological theories of natural selection and survival of the fittest to the fields of sociology and politics (but which is today generally considered a racist pseudoscience). One may interpret Wolf Larsen as a fierce proponent of social Darwinism, since he encourages competition on his boat to weed out weak or unfaithful sailors, and he even sometimes uses language similar to Darwin, such as when he claims life is a "mess" where "the strong eat the weak [so] that they may retain their strength." But Wolf doesn't offer a wholly *positive* portrayal of social Darwinism—despite Wolf's early success as a captain, he is frequently cruel to his crew, and more often acts to satisfy his own whims instead of for the good of the whole ship. Ultimately, Larsen's cruelty and selfishness lead his crew to maroon him.

Wolf Larsen is obsessed with power. His goal is to dominate others, and he forces many of his sailors, including Humphrey Van Weyden, to work for him under conditions that are comparable to slavery. Though London portrays some elements of Wolf's sheer strength in a positive light, he also shows Wolf's ruthless quest for domination as destructive—both for those around him, and for Wolf himself. In one instance, for example, Wolf escalates a rivalry with Death Larsen (Wolf's brother) and ends up losing his whole crew in the process. Jack London further challenges Wolf's ideas about survival of the fittest at the novel's end, when Van Weyden—who, on the surface, is much less "fit" than Wolf Larsen—outsmarts the powerful Wolf Larsen. Ultimately, *The Sea-Wolf* challenges the tenets of Social Darwinism, using the demise of "fit" men like Wolf Larsen to argue that survival of the fittest is about more than physical strength, and that an unhealthy pursuit of strength and power often leads to grave consequences.



LOVE, DUTY, AND CHOICE

Though primarily an adventure novel, Jack London inserts a romantic subplot into *The Sea-Wolf* when the crew of the *Ghost* rescues Maud Brewster, a poet who becomes the love interest of the narrator, Humphrey Van Weyden. Though the love story may seem like a departure from the sea adventures of the first part of the book, it serves as a logical continuation of Van Weyden's character arc, illustrating how he has changed from the helpless intellectual he was at the beginning of the book into a hardworking person who has the confidence and competence to uphold his responsibilities to himself and others. The turning point in Van Weyden's relationship with Maud is when the two of them

escape from the *Ghost*, only to become stranded on an uninhabited island. Away from the *Ghost*, Van Weyden finds that he is responsible for Maud's wellbeing in a way that he's never been for another person before. Though Van Weyden delays confessing his love to Maud for a long time, their shared hardships and responsibilities to each other draw them closer together.

By contrast, Wolf Larsen exemplifies a different sort of "love" and duty, employing violence, coercion, and manipulation to force his crew to remain dutiful and loyal to him. Yet once his health fails him and he can no longer force people to serve him, he loses everything and everyone, ultimately suffering an agonizing, lonely death. At the end of *The Sea-Wolf*, Humphrey Van Weyden and Maud Brewster manage to escape their small island, catch the attention of a passing American vessel, and return to safety. Larsen tries to force them to stay, but because Van Weyden's previous sense of duty toward Larsen was based on fear (rather than a moral obligation) Larsen cannot command duty and respect in the way he once did. Van Weyden's and Larsen's opposite attitudes toward duty, responsibility, and relationships, highlight the limitations of Larsen's coerced sort of "love" and responsibility. Meanwhile, the book's espousal of Van Weyden's approach to love suggests that choice and personal agency form stronger, more meaningful bonds.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



SEALS

The Sea-Wolf contains numerous allusions to "survival of the fittest," a phrase Charles Darwin coined to describe how the organisms that are most likely to survive and reproduce are those that are best adjusted to their natural environment. In *The Sea-Wolf*, seals—which Wolf Larsen and his crew hunt for their valuable pelts—are at the bottom of the evolutionary hierarchy. On the one hand, the seals represent the consequences of weakness—how a lack of strength (fitness) and cunning makes for an easy target. On the other hand, however, the seals are innocent victims that help demonstrate the cruelty of modern society. The narrator, Humphrey Van Weyden notes that the seals are turned into clothing for wealthy women who never have to witness the cruelty and violence involved in the processing of seal pelts. In this way, the seals reveal the hidden violence and cruelty inherent in many aspects of (outwardly) refined, wealthy society. The seals also represent a turning point in the character arcs of Van Weyden and Maud Brewster—when Van Weyden and Brewster find themselves stranded on an

uninhabited island, they must club seals for survival. That Van Weyden and Brewster can bring themselves to kill the seals represents a new level of self-sufficiency for Van Weyden and Brewster—both characters come from affluent backgrounds that did not require much grueling, physical labor. In addition, Van Weyden and Brewster’s willingness to murder the seals shows how survival often requires cruelty. In this way, London shows how the cruelty of modern society mirrors the cruelty inherent in nature.



WIND

Wind, which is often important to sailors, plays a key role in several of the events in *The Sea-Wolf*, and its unpredictable nature helps to portray how sailors—and humans in general—are subject to random chance. Perhaps one of the most fateful cases of wind’s influence occurs when Humphrey Van Weyden and Maud Brewster are trying to escape the cruel captain Wolf Larsen, only to have an unexpected, unfavorable wind strand them on a deserted island instead. Generally, wind represents an obstacle or potential danger. However, wind can also assume a more benevolent role. At the very end of the story, for example, the stormy sea becomes calm after the death of Wolf Larsen, and this calm weather allows Van Weyden and Brewster to finally be rescued by a large ship from the U.S. that spots them. Wind’s variable influence, therefore, suggests that random chance can be both a positive and a negative influence on humanity. Wind also shows how characters are feeling internally. The novel sometimes refers to Wolf Larsen’s bad moods as “squalls” (periods with heavy wind), and stormy weather conditions with high wind accompany many of the story’s darkest psychological moments.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover edition of *The Sea-Wolf* published in 1999.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ I scarcely know where to begin, though I sometimes facetiously place the cause of it all to Charley Furueth’s credit. He kept a summer cottage in Mill Valley, under the shadow of Mount Tamalpais, and never occupied it except when he loafed through the winter months and read Nietzsche and Schopenhauer to rest his brain.

Related Characters: Humphrey Van Weyden (speaker), Wolf Larsen

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis


This passage, which comes from the very beginning of *The Sea-Wolf*, introduces the narrator (Humphrey Van Weyden). The opening lines set the stage by describing the sort of company the narrator keeps. Charley Furueth, the narrator’s friend, has a summer cottage and spends the winter reading philosophical books. This suggests that both Furueth and the narrator come from a privileged background and have enough time and money to lead leisurely lives.

The references to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche are also significant because they foreshadow what’s to come in the story. The character Wolf Larsen, who appears later in the story, embodies many elements of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche’s philosophies—in particular their belief that souls don’t exist and their pessimistic worldviews. But while Charley Furueth engages with these ideas at a safe distance as a reader, Humphrey Van Weyden will soon have to deal with these ideas firsthand when he meets Wolf Larsen.

☞ But life and death were in that glance. I could see the vessel being swallowed up in the fog; I saw the back of the man at the wheel, and the head of the other man turning, slowly turning, as his gaze struck the water and casually lifted along it toward me. His face wore an absent expression, as of deep thought, and I became afraid that if his eyes did light upon me he would nevertheless not see me. But his eyes did light upon me, and looked squarely into mine; and he did see me, for he sprang to the wheel, thrusting the other man aside, and whirled it round and round, hand over hand, at the same time shouting orders of some sort. The vessel seemed to go off at a tangent to its former course and leapt almost instantly from view into the fog.

Related Characters: Humphrey Van Weyden (speaker), Wolf Larsen

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 6



Explanation and Analysis


This passage comes right after the narrator, Humphrey Van Weyden, has survived a ferry crash and is drifting helplessly at sea (he can't swim). Van Weyden's death seems imminent, but he survives when Wolf Larsen, a fearsome seal-hunting captain, spots him in the water and brings him on board his ship. Though Larsen is responsible for saving Van Weyden's life in this case, at other times in the story, Wolf is responsible for the deaths of other sailors on his ship. This gives him an almost superhuman power over life and death. Though the novel critically examines this superhuman image of Wolf Larsen and, in many ways, shows it to be false, here, the narrator (Humphrey Van Weyden) views Larsen as a mythic figure. Details like the thick fog, for example, give the scene an unearthly quality. This passage also explores the role that chance plays in human lives, since Van Weyden survives a catastrophic accident through sheer luck.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☛ Then a most surprising thing occurred. The captain broke loose upon the dead man like a thunderclap. Oaths rolled from his lips in a continuous stream. And they were not namby-pamby oaths, or mere expressions of indecency. Each word was a blasphemy, and there were many words. They crisped and crackled like electric sparks.

Related Characters: Humphrey Van Weyden (speaker), Wolf Larsen

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes a scene aboard Captain Wolf Larsen's vessel just after the death of the mate. The narrator, Humphrey Van Weyden, is still in a state of shock and doesn't quite know what's going on. As someone who is accustomed to a comfortable, intellectual life, he is surprised to see the dead mate on board, since death is more of a distant, theoretical subject for him instead of an everyday reality.

Perhaps even more shocking to Van Weyden is how Wolf Larsen swears so violently at the dead mate, showing none of the reverence or piety that the narrator typically associates with death. This passage helps to establish how Van Weyden's worldview is different from the worldviews

of Wolf Larsen and his crew. It also shows how members of the upper class often have loftier ideas about death because it is more remote for them, but for members of the working class, like Larsen's crew, are more comfortable around death, which makes death less sacred.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☛ 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.

Related Characters: Wolf Larsen (speaker), Humphrey Van Weyden

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis



This passage comes from a conversation between Wolf Larsen and Humphrey Van Weyden. Larsen and Van Weyden are talking about Weyden's income, and Van Weyden claims that he has worked before and has an income. Wolf Larsen correctly points out, however, that most of the money Van Weyden lives off of comes from his wealthy father. Larsen says that Van Weyden lives on "dead man's legs," meaning that rather than "standing" on his own, Van Weyden lives on an inheritance that someone else worked to earn.

Larsen asks to see Van Weyden's hand at the end of the passage because hands are one of the most visible differences between an intellectual like Van Weyden and a sailor like Larsen. Van Weyden's hands are soft, which shows that he has never had to do any manual labor. By contrast, Larsen and the other sailors have calloused hands, which shows that they have worked hard enough for their hands to have adapted to better perform the work. This passage highlights the differences between Van Weyden and Larsen; more broadly, it shows how the upper class differs from the working class.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ He absurdly insisted upon my addressing him as Mr. Mugridge, and his behaviour and carriage were insufferable as he showed me my duties. Besides my work in the cabin, with its four small state-rooms, I was supposed to be his assistant in the galley, and my colossal ignorance concerning such things as peeling potatoes or washing greasy pots was a source of unending and sarcastic wonder to him. He refused to take into consideration what I was, or, rather, what my life and the things I was accustomed to had been.

Related Characters: Humphrey Van Weyden (speaker), Thomas Mugridge

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes how Humphrey Van Weyden adjusts to his new life aboard the *Ghost* as a cabin boy—the lowest-ranking type of sailor. As the newest recruit, Van Weyden must take orders even from the cook, Thomas Mugridge, who is himself a low-ranking member of the crew. Though Mugridge has only a tiny amount of power on the ship, he abuses what little power he has to the fullest, doing everything he can to exercise his authority over Van Weyden.

Mugridge himself has often been the victim of harsh treatment by superior-ranking sailors. But experiencing this abuse doesn't make him more sympathetic to other low-ranking sailors; instead, it motivates him to be even crueler to Van Weyden than his superiors have been to him. One of the recurring ideas in *The Sea-Wolf* is that violence and cruelty can be contagious, and Mugridge seems to have "caught" his cruelty from the sailors above him.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☝☝ "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. What do you make of those things?"

Related Characters: Wolf Larsen (speaker), Humphrey Van Weyden

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Wolf Larsen and Humphrey Van Weyden are embroiled in a philosophical discussion—though Wolf Larsen may appear harsh and uncultured on the surface, he turns out to be a voracious reader of a wide variety of books. Van Weyden, a literary critic, is also a big reader. Though Van Weyden and Larsen have read many of the same books, they interpret them very differently. Because Larsen lacks Van Weyden's formal education, he often reads books the "wrong" way.


In this passage, for example, Larsen demonstrates a simplified version of the concept of "survival of the fittest" from the writings of Charles Darwin (*On the Origin of Species*). By contrast, Van Weyden tends to have a more traditional perspective on many books. He also brings a Christian moral perspective to his interpretation of literature. As a member of the literary world and a self-taught man, Jack London embodies elements of both Larsen and Van Weyden, and so the philosophical arguments between Van Weyden and Larsen rarely have a clear winner—both perspectives add something to the conversation.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ I have made the acquaintance of another one of the crew,—Louis he is called, a rotund and jovial-faced Nova Scotia Irishman, and a very sociable fellow, prone to talk as long as he can find a listener. In the afternoon, while the cook was below asleep and I was peeling the everlasting potatoes, Louis dropped into the galley for a "yarn." His excuse for being aboard was that he was drunk when he signed. He assured me again and again that it was the last thing in the world he would dream of doing in a sober moment. It seems that he has been seal-hunting regularly each season for a dozen years, and is accounted one of the two or three very best boat-steerers in both fleets.

Related Characters: Humphrey Van Weyden (speaker), Louis, Wolf Larsen

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

This passage introduces the character of Louis, who plays a key role in helping Humphrey Van Weyden learn more about life aboard the *Ghost*. Like most of Larsen's crew, Louis isn't there by choice. Although Louis wasn't forced to join the crew in quite the same way as Van Weyden, the fact that he was drunk when he signed up shows that he wasn't making good judgment. Nevertheless, one drunken mistake was apparently all it took for Louis to devote the next 12 years of his life to seal-hunting for Wolf Larsen. Louis's situation illustrates the strange power that Wolf Larsen exercises over his men—how he is able to command and demand loyalty—even from sailors who don't want to be part of the crew. More broadly, Louis's situation shows how seemingly small or spontaneous decisions in the past can have long-lasting consequences.

☞ Where there is room for one life, she sows a thousand lives, and it's life eats life till the strongest and most piggish life is left.

Related Characters: Wolf Larsen (speaker), Humphrey Van Weyden

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

This is another quote from Wolf Larsen where he describes his life's philosophy to Humphrey Van Weyden. As with many of Wolf Larsen's previous quotes, it owes a debt to the writings of many of the authors he's read, in particular Charles Darwin's writings about evolution and survival of the fittest. Larsen sees life as one constant struggle. His vision of humanity doesn't make space for cooperation or healthy relationships—instead, life is just one giant contest where the only way someone to relate to other humans is to crush them in order to get ahead and extend one's own life. In many ways, Larsen's life experiences have informed his views just as much as his reading. As a sailor from a young age who learned to deal with harsh conditions early, it makes sense that Larsen would form such a harsh and unfeeling philosophy of life. Larsen represents how both lived experience and reading can combine to help shape the way a person views the world.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☞ “One hundred and eighty-five dollars even,” he said aloud. “Just as I thought. The beggar came aboard without a cent.”

“And what you have won is mine, sir,” I said boldly.

He favoured me with a quizzical smile. “Hump, I have studied some grammar in my time, and I think your tenses are tangled. ‘Was mine,’ you should have said, not ‘is mine.’”

Related Characters: Humphrey Van Weyden, Wolf Larsen (speaker), Thomas Mugridge

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation is an exchange between Captain Wolf Larsen and Humphrey Van Weyden. Larsen has just defeated Thomas Mugridge in cards and taken all his money. In fact, however, Larsen's winnings—185 dollars in total—is money that Mugridge stole from Van Weyden when Van Weyden first came aboard the *Ghost*. This prompts an argument between Larsen and Van Weyden about who the money really belongs to. Van Weyden believes that the money is still rightfully his, since Mugridge stole it from him in the first place. Van Weyden's stance illustrates how Christianity morality guides his sense of right and wrong.

Larsen, by contrast, argues that the money is his, since he is the one currently in control of it: “Was mine,” Larsen reminds Van Weyden, “not ‘is mine.’” Larsen is arguing the money is rightfully his because he took the initiative to win the money from Mugridge. Even though the money originally belonged to Van Weyden, Van Weyden allowed Mugridge to steal it from him in the first place—and then made no effort to get it back. Larsen's morality is based on power and takes inspiration from Darwin's “survival of the fittest,” which describes how the strongest organisms are more likely to survive and evolve. Throughout the book, Larsen questions commonly held ideas about right and wrong, using his outsider perspective to oppose Van Weyden's Christian morality.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☞ “No,” Wolf Larsen answered, with an indescribable air of sadness. “And he is all the happier for leaving life alone. He is too busy living it to think about it. My mistake was in ever opening the books.”

Related Characters: Wolf Larsen (speaker), Death Larsen, Humphrey Van Weyden

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Wolf Larsen describes his brother, Death Larsen, to Van Weyden. Though Wolf and Death are alike in many ways—both are among the most fearsome captains on the sea—Death takes things even further than Wolf. Whereas Wolf’s violent instincts are partly informed by his reading and studies of science and philosophy, Death seems to act purely on instinct. Wolf seems to envy his brother’s purity of motivation—Wolf likes seeing things in black-and-white terms, but all of his reading has forced him to consider nuance in a way that his brother hasn’t. Whereas the novel challenges and ultimately undermines Wolf Larsen’s status as a mythic character, Death Larsen retains his mythic status throughout the book. Van Weyden never witnesses Death in person, leaving Death as a sort of unattainable ideal for what Wolf Larsen’s life could have been under different circumstances.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☞ “You are afraid of him now. You are afraid of me. You cannot deny it. If I should catch you by the throat, thus,—his hand was about my throat and my breath was shut off,—and began to press the life out of you thus, and thus, your instinct of immortality will go glimmering, and your instinct of life, which is longing for life, will flutter up, and you will struggle to save yourself. Eh? I see the fear of death in your eyes.”

Related Characters: Wolf Larsen (speaker), Humphrey Van Weyden

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

This quote happens at the end of Wolf Larsen and Humphrey Van Weyden’s philosophical discussion about the existence of souls. Larsen is a strong believer in materialism, a philosophical stance that argues that material world is all there is. As such, Larsen doesn’t believe that souls exist. Van Weyden, by contrast, is a philosophical idealist, so he believes that there is a spiritual dimension to reality, as well. As such, Van Weyden believes that humans



have souls that live forever.

Though Van Weyden is afraid of Larsen, he defends his idealist positions fiercely. Larsen, perhaps frustrated that he can’t dominate Van Weyden with words, resorts to physical force—he chokes Van Weyden until Van Weyden passes out, just to illustrate a point. Larsen is often violent, and the violent act of choking is particularly symbolic since the throat is where words come from. When Larsen chokes Van Weyden, he is trying to suggest that no amount of words can defeat someone who is physically stronger. This scene shows the brutality of Larsen’s worldview. It also foreshadows a later scene where he tries to choke Van Weyden for real, not just as a demonstration.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☞ The last twenty-four hours have witnessed a carnival of brutality. From cabin to forecabin it seems to have broken out like a contagion.

Related Characters: Humphrey Van Weyden (speaker), Wolf Larsen, Johnson, George Leach, Thomas Mugridge

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis



This passage describes a particularly tumultuous time on the *Ghost* when the crew members engage in acts of violence against each other. At one point, the sailor Johnson gets into a fight with the ship’s captain, Wolf Larsen. Larsen beats Johnson cruelly, perhaps to make a point to the other sailors on board. Larsen has established that he puts little value on human life, and he uses Johnson as an example of what happens to anyone who tries to cross him.

Later, when the cabin boy George Leach steps in to heal Johnson’s wounds and criticize Larsen, Thomas Mugridge (the cook) jumps in and tries to start a fight with Leach. The scene shows how violence can spread like a disease. After witnessing Wolf Larsen’s actions, the low-ranking Mugridge perhaps believes he can win Larsen’s favor by picking a fight with the defiant Leach. On his ship, Larsen rewards acts of violence—but only for those who are strong enough to overcome their opponents—which matches up with Larsen’s harsh views about the world at large.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☞☞ Then Wolf Larsen's other hand reached up and clutched the edge of the scuttle. The mass swung clear of the ladder, the men still clinging to their escaping foe. They began to drop off, to be brushed off against the sharp edge of the scuttle, to be knocked off by the legs which were now kicking powerfully.

Related Characters: Humphrey Van Weyden (speaker), George Leach, Wolf Larsen, Johnson, Johansen

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis



This passage describes a scene in the middle of a mutiny led by some members of the *Ghost's* crew against their captain, Wolf Larsen. After Larsen beats and embarrasses Johnson, Johnson organizes a mutiny with George Leach, the cabin boy. While the narrator and Larsen are distracted, the mutinying sailors manage to kill the mate, Johansen, who often carried out Larsen's will. When it comes to killing Larsen himself, however, things aren't so easy. The chaotic scene of Larsen struggling against all the sailors trying to kill him (some of whom don't even know what's going on) recalls the metaphor that Larsen made earlier about yeast, and how the different bits of ferment in the yeast are all struggling to be the biggest. The mass of attacking sailors represents how Larsen views life as one big struggle where everyone is competing with each other in a confusing mess. The fact that Larsen manages to escape the sailors, despite being severely outnumbered, suggests that his strength and determination help him to overcome survival-of-the-fittest situations.


Chapter 17 Quotes

☞☞ "I don't think it was worth it," I said to Wolf Larsen, "a broken boat for Kelly's life."

"But Kelly didn't amount to much," was the reply. "Good-night."

Related Characters: Wolf Larsen, Humphrey Van Weyden (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

This passage contains a conversation between the narrator, Humphrey Van Weyden and the captain, Wolf Larsen, shortly after the *Ghost* has survived a deadly storm. During a storm with high winds, Larsen prioritizes saving the small hunting boats above all else. His misplaced priorities ultimately cause a sailor named Kelly to die as he tries in vain to protect the boats. While Larsen has already told Van Weyden about his disregard for human life, Larsen's behavior during the storm puts Larsen's disregard for human life on full display.

The difference between Van Weyden's old life in society and his new life at sea is that back when he was just a gentleman, topics like mortality and the value of life were distant, abstract, and hypothetical. But his new life as a sailor forces him to confront these difficult issues firsthand. Larsen consistent in his pessimistic view of life, no matter the circumstances. Van Weyden, by contrast, changes his views over the course of the book as new circumstances force him to abandon his sacred ideas about life and death in order to fit with the realities he faces at sea.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☞☞ She seemed to me like a being from another world. I was aware of a hungry out-reaching for her, as of a starving man for bread. But then, I had not seen a woman for a very long time. I know that I was lost in a great wonder, almost a stupor,—this, then, was a woman?—so that I forgot myself and my mate's duties, and took no part in helping the new-comers aboard.

Related Characters: Humphrey Van Weyden (speaker), Maud Brewster, Wolf Larsen, Johnson, George Leach

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis



This passage describes the appearance of Maud Brewster, the only female character in *The Sea-Wolf*—and a character who drives much of the plot in the second half of the book. As with many events in *The Sea-Wolf*, Maud Brewster's rescue happens by chance when Larsen spots her small boat while scanning the waters for the runaway sailors Johnson and George Leach. As a woman, Brewster is an unusual addition to the all-male crew, and her sudden appearance causes Van Weyden to reevaluate his feelings about life on the *Ghost*. From the beginning, Van Weyden has had reservations about Wolf Larsen and his violent ways, but the appearance of Brewster (a poet that Van Weyden knows from his time as a literary critic) motivates him to

hold on to some of the things he valued in his old life, like Christian morality and culture. Brewster represents the opposite of Larsen, embodying cooperation and intellect instead of competition and violence.

Chapter 19 Quotes

☞☞ “I was not thinking of taking them aboard when I made that promise,” he answered. “And anyway, you’ll agree I’ve not laid my hands upon them.”

Related Characters: Wolf Larsen (speaker), Humphrey Van Weyden, Johnson, George Leach

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis



This quote comes from Captain Wolf Larsen, who has just allowed the sailors Johnson and George Leach to perish by refusing to let them leave their small boat and board the *Ghost*. After Leach and Johnson instigated a mutiny, they knew that Larsen would punish them harshly, so they tried—unsuccessfully—to escape in a small hunting boat. Van Weyden, who feels sympathy for Leach and Johnson, tries to persuade Larsen not to lay a hand on either of the sailors. Larsen agrees and seems to show mercy. But as it turns out, Larsen deliberately misinterprets Van Weyden’s request by finding a way to kill Johnson and Leach that doesn’t involve physically touching them. This scene demonstrates Larsen’s talent for misreading things to suit his own needs. While Larsen is well-read, he seems to read to justify things he already believes, and his misreading of Van Weyden’s request not to touch the escaped men demonstrates this.

Chapter 24 Quotes

☞☞ He stopped abruptly, and then on his lips formed one of his strange quizzical smiles, as he added:

“It’s from my brain I envy you, take notice, and not from my heart. My reason dictates it. The envy is an intellectual product. I am like a sober man looking upon drunken men, and, greatly weary, wishing he, too, were drunk.”

Related Characters: Wolf Larsen (speaker), Humphrey Van Weyden, Maud Brewster

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

Wolf Larsen, Humphrey van Weyden, and Maud Brewster are discussing one of Larsen’s favorite topics: the existence (or nonexistence) of the human soul. Larsen remains steadfast in his belief that humans have no soul, whereas Brewster is even more passionate about her belief in souls than Van Weyden, who also believes in souls. In this quote, Larsen tries to explain his views by saying that he’s jealous of Brewster and her belief in souls. It seems strange, perhaps that Larsen’s “brain” wants to believe in souls but his “heart” doesn’t, since religious belief is often portrayed as coming directly from the heart. By inverting the traditional roles of the brain and heart, Larsen once again shows how his views of the world don’t conform to Van Weyden’s Christian ideals. Looking ahead to future chapters, it is fitting that Larsen’s brain should long for eternal life, since, as it turns out, a diseased brain is what ultimately kills him. This passage about Larsen’s brain and heart shows the many contradictions of his characters and how even his own body seems to sometimes be at war with itself.

Chapter 25 Quotes

☞☞ “What of the *Macedonia*?”

“Not sighted,” I answered.

I could have sworn his face fell at the intelligence, but why he should be disappointed I could not conceive.

Related Characters: Wolf Larsen, Humphrey Van Weyden (speaker), Death Larsen

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis


This passage, which portrays a conversation between Captain Wolf Larsen and Humphrey Van Weyden, occurs shortly after Wolf has spotted the ship of his fearsome brother, Death Larsen. Wolf and Death do not get along, and the appearance of Death’s ship means that trouble is on the horizon for Wolf and his crew. In part this might be because Wolf Larsen’s code of self-reliance is so strong that he doesn’t even make exceptions for family. Nevertheless, although Death poses a threat to him, Wolf looks forward to the prospect of confronting his brother. And, as this passage shows, he’s disappointed when that prospect goes away.

This passage highlights how Wolf Larsen is a daredevil. His brother's nickname—Death—is appropriate because Wolf enjoys trying to overcome both Death (his brother) and death (mortality). The finality of Death Larsen's name suggests that he may be the one opponent that even Wolf Larsen isn't strong or cunning enough to overcome, but this is exactly the reason why Wolf can't help trying to compete with Death anyway.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☞ Again that unnamable and unmistakable terror was in her eyes, and she said, almost in a whisper, "You are Lucifer."

Related Characters: Maud Brewster (speaker), Wolf Larsen, Humphrey Van Weyden

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Maud Brewster accuses Captain Wolf Larsen of being Lucifer, the devil. Brewster's accusation comes during Brewster, Van Weyden, and Larsen's discussion of *Paradise Lost*, an epic poem by John Milton which tells the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden. Milton's retelling of the story features Satan as a major character. Though Satan is the villain in *Paradise Lost*, he is a memorable character, and some later critics and writers have interpreted Satan as a tragic hero due to the ways that he challenges traditional authority.


Unsurprisingly, Wolf Larsen sees Milton's Satan in a positive light—he admires Satan's self-reliance and willingness to challenge traditional morality. This is what prompts Brewster to call Larsen "Lucifer," and it seems likely that author Jack London himself drew inspiration from Satan when creating the character of Larsen. Though Larsen seems indifferent to being called Lucifer at first, he assaults Brewster later that night. Larsen's violent act of retribution against Brewster shows how in Larsen's conflict-based worldview, there's little difference between verbal and physical arguments.

Chapter 27 Quotes

☞ I looked at my watch. It was one o'clock. I had slept seven hours! And she had been steering seven hours! When I took the steering-oar I had first to unbend her cramped fingers. Her modicum of strength had been exhausted, and she was unable even to move from her position. I was compelled to let go the sheet while I helped her to the nest of blankets and chafed her hands and arms.

Related Characters: Humphrey Van Weyden (speaker), Maud Brewster, Wolf Larsen

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes events that occur shortly after Humphrey Van Weyden and Maud Brewster finally make and execute their plan to escape Wolf Larsen and the *Ghost*. Though Van Weyden has long been dissatisfied with Larsen and his cruel style of leadership, he isn't motivated to escape until he witnesses Larsen assaulting Brewster. Though running away from the swift, mighty *Ghost* in a small hunting boat is dangerous, a favorable wind allows Van Weyden and Brewster to escape.

Once aboard the hunting boat, Van Weyden teaches Brewster how to steer so she can direct the ship while Van Weyden sleeps. Van Weyden plans to only sleep for a couple hours, so he is shocked when he wakes up a full seven hours later. Steering for seven hours is an impressive physical feat, especially since the reason Brewster was at sea in the first place was because of her poor health. This section shows how desperate situations can often lead people to find strength that they didn't even realize they had.

Chapter 30 Quotes

☞ "We must club the seals," I announced, when convinced of my poor marksmanship. "I have heard the sealers talk about clubbing them."

Related Characters: Humphrey Van Weyden (speaker), Maud Brewster

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

Humphrey Van Weyden and Maud Brewster have escaped the *Ghost*—only to become stranded on a small island (that they name Endeavour Island). As they discuss how to build an insulated and waterproof shelter, Van Weyden realizes that the best material available for this project would be seal pelts. Though Van Weyden and Brewster used to be horrified by how the hunters on the *Ghost* clubbed seals to sell the skins (which were then used for wealthy people’s clothing), they now find themselves contemplating clubbing seals themselves.

On the one hand, Van Weyden and Brewster’s willingness to club the seals demonstrates their inner growth: they’re now willing to exercise new survival skills and overcome a challenge through cooperation. At the same time, however, clubbing the seals causes Van Weyden and Brewster harm innocent creatures, which goes against their ideals and robs them of their innocence. Ultimately, this passage demonstrates how life-or-death situations force people to make hard choices, and how people often reconsider their own morality when their lives are at stake.

Chapter 32 Quotes

☞ “Hump,” he said slowly, “you can’t do it. You are not exactly afraid. You are impotent. Your conventional morality is stronger than you.”

Related Characters: Wolf Larsen (speaker), Humphrey Van Weyden, Maud Brewster, Death Larsen

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 202

Explanation and Analysis

This quote happens after Van Weyden discovers Larsen’s vessel, the *Ghost* off the shore of the deserted island where he and Maud Brewster are stranded. Larsen has been marooned, abandoned by his entire crew after his brother (Death Larsen) tracked him down and offered all his crew members better pay. But even alone, the fearsome Wolf Larsen remains a potential threat to Van Weyden and Brewster—they stole a boat from Larsen, and Larsen doesn’t let go of grudges easily.

Van Weyden draws his gun at Larsen and has a chance to shoot his unarmed opponent. When Van Weyden hesitates, though, Larsen, who is always fearless in the face of death,

mocks Van Weyden’s “conventional morality.” One famous critic of conventional morality was the 19th-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Sea-Wolf* references Nietzsche on its first page—he’s the favorite author the friend Van Weyden was traveling to visit before a ferry collision catastrophically alters his plans. As the story unfolds, Van Weyden’s seafaring adventure forces him to experience firsthand the critiques of morality that his intellectual friends only read about. Van Weyden’s refusal to shoot Larsen suggests that he still retains some of his old views on morality, despite the changes he’s gone through.

Chapter 33 Quotes

☞ Giving over his attempt to determine the shadow, he stepped on deck and started forward, walking with a swiftness and confidence which surprised me. And still there was that hint of the feebleness of the blind in his walk. I knew it now for what it was.

Related Characters: Humphrey Van Weyden (speaker), Wolf Larsen, Maud Brewster

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 210

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes a moment when Humphrey Van Weyden sneaks aboard the *Ghost* to spy on Wolf Larsen, who has been suspiciously quiet ever since his ship first appeared near the island. After Larsen ends up stranded in the *Ghost* off Endeavour Island, a tense standoff ensues. Van Weyden and Brewster know Larsen is a dangerous man, but Larsen also appears to be weakened by illness and doesn’t give any indication of what his intentions are.

When Van Weyden finally goes to investigate whether Larsen is even still alive, he is shocked to discover that things are both better and worse than he feared. On the one hand, Larsen is blind—the man who once saved Van Weyden’s life with a glance is now deprived of sight. At the same time, however, Larsen remains agile, suggesting that either he is faking his weakness or, perhaps, may still be able to summon energy at crucial moments. This passage shows that even a figure as seemingly superhuman as Wolf Larsen is ultimately as mortal and vulnerable to disease as anyone else.

Chapter 37 Quotes

“I am still a bit of the ferment, you see,” he wrote a little later.

“I am glad you are as small a bit as you are,” I said.

“Thank you,” he wrote. “But just think of how much smaller I shall be before I die.”

Related Characters: Wolf Larsen, Humphrey Van Weyden (speaker), Maud Brewster

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 235

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation between Wolf Larsen and Humphrey Van Weyden occurs just after the half-paralyzed Larsen manages to start a fire on the *Ghost*. Van Weyden and Maud Brewster have managed to repair the *Ghost* (despite Larsen’s interference), and they eventually use it to escape Endeavour Island, where they have been stranded. Due to a brain illness that causes strokes, Larsen’s condition has deteriorated rapidly, and he can barely move. Nevertheless, his last act of defiance is to knock over a lantern to burn the *Ghost* down.

Larsen’s quote about being a “bit of ferment” is a reference to a metaphor he often uses about yeast. According to him, the biggest bits of ferment in the yeast survive by eating up all the smaller, weaker bits, and this is also how life is among humans (a view that is partly inspired by Charles Darwin’s writings about survival of the fittest). On the one hand, this passage shows the limits of Larsen’s philosophies—if you dedicate your life to survival of the fittest, eventually you’ll reach a point where you’re no longer the fittest. At the same time, however, the passage depicts how there is something tragic and perhaps even admirable about Larsen’s refusal to change his ways, even as he approaches death.

Chapter 38 Quotes

“And immortality?” Maud queried loudly in the ear.

Three times the hand essayed to write but fumbled hopelessly. The pencil fell. In vain we tried to replace it. The fingers could not close on it. Then Maud pressed and held the fingers about the pencil with her own hand and the hand wrote, in large letters, and so slowly that the minutes ticked off to each letter: “B-O-S-H.”

Related Characters: Maud Brewster, Wolf Larsen

(speaker), Humphrey Van Weyden

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 236

Explanation and Analysis

This passage depicts Maud Brewster talking to Wolf Larsen, who has been rendered paralyzed and unable to speak by a stroke and so can only communicate by writing. It returns to a subject that Brewster, Larsen, and Humphrey Van Weyden have discussed more than any other: the existence of souls and the possibility of eternal life. Brewster, a firm believer in souls, asks Larsen if being so close to death has made him believe in the possibility of eternal life. She seems to expect that Larsen’s deteriorating condition will make him reevaluate his views about the world.


Surprisingly, or perhaps not at all surprisingly, Larsen remains firm in his own convictions until the end. The word he writes, “bosh,” is British slang for “nonsense!” As Larsen’s final word, “bosh” is fitting: it’s a defiant answer to Brewster’s question, and it also sums up Larsen’s general worldview. Larsen seems to truly believe that human life is inherently meaningless, and so for him, everything is “bosh.” Though Wolf Larsen is the story’s villain, his most positive trait is his consistency—and his refusal to abandon his nihilistic worldview, even as he approaches death, illustrates this trait.


Chapter 39 Quotes

“One kiss, dear love,” I whispered. “One kiss more before they come.”

“And rescue us from ourselves,” she completed, with a most adorable smile, whimsical as I had never seen it, for it was whimsical with love.

Related Characters: Humphrey Van Weyden, Maud Brewster (speaker), Wolf Larsen

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 244

Explanation and Analysis

This passage includes the very last lines of the novel and features dialogue between Humphrey Van Weyden and Maud Brewster. After Wolf Larsen dies, the unfavorable stormy winds die down, and the calm weather allows Van

Weyden and Brewster to be spotted by a U.S. ship. Though *The Sea-Wolf* explores dark parts of human psychology, its ending is conventional and happy, with the hero and heroine kissing right as they're being rescued.

The ending is a big moment for Van Weyden, as he has finally overcome perhaps the final hurdle he faced in his character development—working up the courage to confess his feelings to Brewster. The happy ending for Van Weyden and

Brewster seems to suggest that their traditional version of morality and their emphasis on cooperation leads to happiness, whereas Wolf Larsen's unconventional morality based on individualism leads to misery and dying alone. Still, Wolf Larsen remains perhaps the most powerful and memorable character in *The Sea-Wolf*, and for this reason, it is impossible to totally dismiss him or his pessimistic worldview, despite the novel's happy ending.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

In the San Francisco Bay on a foggy morning in January, the narrator is taking a ferry-steamship called *The Martinez* to visit a friend's summer cottage. The narrator is an intellectual who has written about Edgar Allen Poe for the most recent issue of *The Atlantic*. As the narrator contemplates ideas for a new essay, a red-faced man interrupts to say that there is nasty weather ahead.

Suddenly, the noise of a horn reveals that there is another ferry-boat somewhere in the fog. The *Martinez* changes course to try to avoid a collision. The red-faced man tells the narrator that he hears another boat coming right for them—it can't hear the *Martinez* because the **wind** is blowing the wrong way. Just then, the fog breaks, and the bow of another steamship appears.

The red-faced man advises the narrator to find something to hang on to, while the pilot of the *Martinez* acknowledges that a collision seems inevitable. Suddenly, the vessels collide, throwing the narrator down onto the deck. The narrator's memory becomes hazy, but he remembers the sound of women screaming.

Eventually, all the screaming drives the narrator hysterical, and he finds himself laughing without knowing why. He collects himself and looks around on the *Martinez* as it sinks, then he finally jumps overboard into the cold water, joining many of the other passengers.

The narrator has a life preserver, but if anything happens to it, he can't swim. He can hear screaming but, in the fog, he gets separated from the others and floats alone. He loses track of time.

The *Sea-Wolf* opens on a peaceful scene in the Francisco Bay. The peacefulness of this scene reflects the narrator's comfortable life. The red-faced man offers further evidence of Van Weyden's leisurely life—his red face reflects his experience at sea. Van Weyden, in contrast, has softer features, since he hasn't had to do manual labor. Already, however, there are signs of danger on the horizon; the fog, for instance, suggests an inability to see the future.



The fact that the people on the *Martinez* can see the other boat but can't avoid it illustrates humanity's inability to control fate. Another thing to note: the novel often uses wind to show how random chance advances the plot; here, the wind contributes to the collision between the two ships.



The inevitability of the collision once again suggests how fate shapes the trajectory of human life. The screaming women suggest that polite society can break down in moments of crisis.



The narrator's laughter suggests that his mind can't comprehend the scene in front of him, and so it has driven him insane. When he hits the cold water, though, he comes to his senses; being forced to contend with the elements teaches the narrator, who has formerly lived a life of comfort and leisure, that he needs to think clearly if he wants to survive.



The narrator's inability to swim once again emphasizes the fact that he is an upper-class intellectual whose privilege has enabled him to avoid contending with life-or-death circumstances. As such, he is disconnected from nature and helpless at sea.



Another vessel with three triangular sails appears. The narrator tries to shout at it but can't. Just by chance, however, a man on the vessel looks down and see the narrator. The ship disappears into the fog, but soon after, the narrator hears oars and the call of a man. The man asks why the narrator didn't should for help, but the narrator passes out before he can answer the man.

This scene once again represents the role random chance plays in life: although the narrator was unlucky to be caught in a crash, he was lucky that a man on this approaching ship has spotted him.



CHAPTER 2

The narrator sees stars and comets above him and figures he must be dreaming. He keeps hearing a gong sound. Suddenly, the narrator catches his breath and opens his eyes. He realizes he's on a ship at sea and the gong sound is in fact a frying-pan hanging on the wall.

The narrator's hallucinations, particularly the lights, suggest that he is near death. The seriousness of this scene deflates, however, when the narrator realizes the gong sound is only a frying pan. This shows how the narrator's time at sea will challenge and puncture many of his high ideas (he is a literary critic.)



Two men are kneeling over the narrator. One is a Scandinavian-looking man named Johnson (called "Yonson" by the other man), who has been rubbing the narrator's chest to revive him. The other is a Cockney and the ship's cook. The narrator asks for new clothes and asks where he is. Johnson tells him he's on a vessel called the *Ghost*, which is headed toward Japan to go **seal**-hunting. The narrator then asks to see the captain.

"Cockney" refers to a person from East London—it typically describes a working-class person and with a distinctive accent. Being at sea places the narrator in contact with people from whom his privileged background would usually separate him.



Johnson and the cook (whose name is Thomas Mugridge) give the narrator new clothes that smell awful. Johnson remarks that the narrator has soft skin and must be a gentleman. The narrator is a little offended at the smelly clothes and the crew members' poor hospitality.

The novel makes repeated reference to the narrator's soft skin, often in contrast to the sailors' calloused hands. Because the narrator hasn't worked with his hands like the sailors, his body is more vulnerable. The narrator's soft, vulnerable physique reflects his psychological softness and lacking survival skills.



The narrator spots the man that saw him in the sea and rescued him. The man is 5' 10" but strongly built. He looks powerful just pacing around. It turns out his man is the captain: Wolf Larsen. Near the captain is another man who is on his back and dying. The dying man passes away, and Wolf Larsen swears at him. The narrator is shocked to see the captain treat death so casually.

Earlier, Wolf Larsen saved the narrator's life with a glance, and now he seems to look death in the face and swear at it instead of being afraid. The narrator builds up a picture of Wolf as someone who is almost superhuman and feels unthreatened by mortal fears. the narrator's first impression of Wolf reflects the immense power that Wolf Larsen wields over his crew.



CHAPTER 3

Wolf Larsen stops cursing over the dying man and orders Mugridge the cook to get back to work. He asks if anyone has a prayer book to say a ceremony for the dead man, then he asks if the narrator is a preacher. The narrator informs Larsen that he's not—that, in fact, his profession is “a gentleman.” Wolf sneers and accuses the narrator of living off his father's work.

The narrator asks Wolf Larsen to take him home at once, but Larsen makes an offer instead: the death of his mate will require him to promote other sailors, which will leave an opening for the low-ranking position of cabin boy. Wolf wants the narrator to take the role of cabin boy, and he doesn't seem to offer the narrator much choice.

Wolf Larsen calls for Mugridge, who brings out a cabin boy. The cabin boy gives his name as George Leach but seems to be lying. Wolf Larsen orders the cabin boy around, and the narrator is afraid of what will happen if he himself becomes a cabin boy. When another vessel passes, the narrator suddenly runs to the side and shouts that he'll pay a thousand dollars to anyone who takes him home. Wolf Larsen claims the narrator is just delusional, and the ship passes.

The narrator resigns himself to being a cabin boy and gives his name as Humphrey Van Weyden. He is 35 years old. The whole crew convenes to bury the dead man at sea, and the ritual isn't as solemn as Van Weyden expected it to be. There are the sailors (who are mainly English and Scandinavian) and then there are the **seal** hunters (who come from a wider range of backgrounds). Afterward, Wolf Larsen orders the whole crew to prepare for harsh conditions.

CHAPTER 4

Wolf Larsen tasks Mugridge (the cook, whom the crew calls “the doctor,” the hunters call “Tommy,” and Wolf Larsen calls “Cooky”) with teaching Van Weyden how to be a cabin boy. Mugridge is a cruel boss who takes advantage of his new power.

The fact that everyone on the ship goes back to work soon after the funeral illustrates how death is a regular and expected part of life at sea. Though such a life is difficult, it also means that the sailors are very self-reliant, which is why Wolf Larsen is so dismissive of the narrator and his inheritance.



That Wolf Larsen is more concerned about filling the dead mate's position than mourning him illustrates Wolf Larsen's indifference toward death. Wolf's harsh pragmatism contrasts with the narrator's more sheltered perspective—for Van Weyden, death is rare and sacred.



The fact that the narrator's money doesn't help him on the ship suggests that even wealth and social status have limits on their influence, particularly when out in nature. Wolf Larsen's refusal of the money is a bad business decision, so it suggests that he has some other set of principles, even if these principles are very different from the narrator's morality.



The narrator is older than a protagonist in a coming-of-age story would typically be, but his story nevertheless follows the trajectory of a coming-of-age story—he progresses from less experienced at sea to more experienced. This suggests how wealth and a sedentary life can cause a person to remain in a state of extended adolescence, whereas harsh conditions force people to grow up quickly.



Though Mugridge is a low-ranking sailor on the ship, he uses what power he does have to behave cruelly. Mugridge's power-hungry demeanor shows how cruelty and abuse can exist as self-perpetuating cycles.



One day during stormy conditions, a wave knocks over Van Weyden (whom Wolf Larsen has given the nickname “Hump”), injuring his knee. Nobody treats the knee wound, and it continues to bother Van Weyden as he goes about his tasks, which include serving Wolf Larsen and the hunters their food.

Van Weyden's injury reflects his inexperience at sea. The fact that Wolf Larsen at first does nothing to help Van Weyden with his wound suggest that Wolf Larsen values self-reliance over compassion.



Van Weyden reflects on how strange it is that he's gone from his intellectual background to his current situation as cabin boy on a **seal**-hunting schooner. He considers how his mother and sisters will presume him dead. He tries to get to sleep in his new lodging in the hunters' steerage but finds he can't.

Van Weyden begins to accept his current situation and new identity, even though he hasn't gotten used to them yet. The fact that he will be presumed dead in the shipwreck symbolizes how his old, privileged self has died—now, he'll have to become a new, more self-reliant version of himself if he wants to survive.



CHAPTER 5

The next day, Van Weyden must move to a new cabin because the new mate Johansen talks in his sleep and Wolf Larsen can't deal with it. Van Weyden finds that his old clothes are now dry, and he changes back into them—but he finds that money is missing from his purse. When he confronts Mugridge about the missing money, Mugridge threatens to hit him, so Van Weyden runs away.

The fact that Van Weyden moves to a new cabin just because Wolf Larsen can't stand Johansen talking in his sleep shows once again how life on the Ghost is determined by Larsen's whims. The theft of Van Weyden's money by Larsen shows that some sailors have no problem stabbing each other in the back.



Later that day, Van Weyden is discarding ashes from a stove. He accidentally throws the ashes over the windward side, getting ashes on himself, Wolf Larsen, and a hunter. Van Weyden fears the worst, but Wolf Larsen brushes off Van Weyden's mistake.

Although the novel has portrayed Wolf Larsen as powerful and cruel up to this point, this passage shows that violent and unpredictable mood swings are another central aspect of Wolf's character.



Later, Van Weyden is surprised to discover, while making Wolf Larsen's bed, that the captain's bookshelf contains books by authors like William Shakespeare, Alfred Tennyson, Edgar Allen Poe, and Charles Darwin. He supposes that Wolf Larsen is not as ignorant as he initially appeared. This discovery motivates Van Weyden to go to Wolf Larsen and tell him that someone has stolen his money.

This passage continues with the idea that there is more to Wolf Larsen's character than meets the eye. Out of the writers on Wolf Larsen's bookshelf, perhaps the most significant is Charles Darwin—Darwin's concept of “survival of the fittest” fascinates Larsen, as evidenced by the cruel, backbreaking way he commands his crew. Finally, it's worth noting that Van Weyden only feels comfortable confiding in Larsen after he sees that Larsen is well-read. This shows how largely class factors into Van Weyden's worldview—Larsen's intellectual interests make him an equal and confidant in Van Weyden's mind.



Wolf Larsen listens to Van Weyden's tale about Mugridge robbing him, but he refuses to intervene, saying the money is a fair price for Van Weyden's life. Wolf Larsen says Van Weyden needs to learn how to hang on to money for himself. Robbery brings up the topic of morality, and the two men talk about whether they believe in souls. Wolf Larsen does not believe in eternal life, but Van Weyden does.

Though Wolf Larsen and Van Weyden have read many of the same authors, they interpret the authors' messages very differently. This scene shows how literally Larsen interprets Darwin's concept of "survival of the fittest." Larsen's literal reading of Darwin informs his refusal to help Van Weyden retrieve the stolen money. Larsen seems to believe that Mugridge's ability to steal from Van Weyden is proof that Mugridge is "fitter" than Van Weyden—and that for Larsen to help Van Weyden retrieve the money would mean interfering in the natural order of things.



Wolf Larsen believes life is chaotic and that hunger and selfishness motivate much of human behavior. He concludes the conversation by asking how much money Mugridge stole. Soon after, Van Weyden hears him cursing men elsewhere on the ship.

Wolf Larsen's belief that life is chaotic plays out in his behavior, which is itself chaotic and hard to understand. Just minutes after dismissing Mugridge's robbery, Larsen asks Van Weyden how much money Mugridge stole—should Van Weyden take this to mean that Larsen now cares about the robbery? Or is it wrong to attach rhyme or reason to Larsen's behavior?



CHAPTER 6

By the next morning, the storm has ended, and the sea is calmer. The men prepare for hunting. The *Ghost* is a schooner built for speed, and Wolf Larsen has a reputation for recklessness. Most sailors claim not to have known about Wolf Larsen or his reputation before they joined the crew—those that did know about him only joined because more respectable schooners wouldn't accept them.

*The passage confirms that Van Weyden is not the only unwilling sailor aboard the *Ghost*—in fact, it seems that just about every sailor would rather be somewhere else. This demonstrates Wolf Larsen's strange power to command his crew, even when it's against their will.*



Van Weyden meets a crew member named Louis, a talkative Nova Scotia Irish man from Nova Scotia who tells Van Weyden about Wolf Larsen's reputation. Louis says Wolf Larsen is monstrous, comparing him to the Beast of Revelation. He tells stories about Wolf Larsen's cruelties.

*The character of Louis helps the inexperienced narrator to learn more about life on the *Ghost*. The *Beast of Revelation* is a creature from the *Book of Revelation*, the last book of the *New Testament* of the *Christian Bible*—it's supposed to appear at the end of the world. The *Bible* describes the *Beast* as coming out of the sea—which explains why Louis compares Louis to the *Beast*.*



Meanwhile, Van Weyden still has trouble getting along with Mugridge, who continues to insist that Van Weyden call him "sir." Van Weyden's hands also begin to bother him, blistering from all the work. His knee remains swollen.

None of the other sailors respect Mugridge, and Mugridge takes out his frustration on Van Weyden—the one sailor who has no choice but to listen to him. Mugridge's abuse of power shows how people who have experienced cruelty can pass down that cruelty to others.



One day, before supper, Johansen orders a newer recruit named Harrison to fix one of the sails by climbing up onto the halyard. Harrison is afraid to do so, because the task involves going 80 feet up, but Johansen insists, swearing at the boy to motivate him. Wolf Larsen tells Johansen to rein it in—he's the one who does the swearing on the ship.

A halyard is a rope used to hoist a sail. Fixing a sail by climbing up on the halyard is a very dangerous task. Though Wolf Larsen approves of his men performing feats of bravery, he disapproves of anything that makes it seem like Johansen is taking on some of Larsen's authority.



The **wind** nearly blows Harrison off the halyard, but he catches himself. He remains up there for a long time, and Wolf Larsen supervises his work. Van Weyden is nervous for Harrison, but others, like Mugridge, enjoy the spectacle. Wolf Larsen prevents anyone from helping Harrison. At last, Van Weyden has to leave to prepare supper, but he finds that Harrison has descended safely.

Wolf Larsen's refusal to let anybody help Harrison reflects his strong belief in self-reliance. For others like Mugridge, however, Harrison's struggles are less of a learning experience and more of a spectacle to watch.



Van Weyden confesses to Wolf Larsen that the treatment of Harrison made him squeamish. Wolf Larsen scoffs at this and questions Van Weyden's assertion that human life has value. Wolf Larsen talks about how "life eats life till the strongest and most piggish life is left," and Van Weyden accuses him of misreading Darwin. They continue to argue, and Van Weyden concedes that at least Wolf is consistent.

This is perhaps the first time that Wolf Larsen and Van Weyden talk directly about Charles Darwin and his influence on Larsen's way of thinking. Larsen's language about the strongest life eating weaker life seems to reflect ideas Darwin's concept of "survival of the fittest," but the well-read Van Weyden challenges Larsen's attempt to apply Darwin to everyday situations (like Harrison's struggle on the halyard) with so little nuance.



CHAPTER 7

After three days of changing **winds**, the *Ghost* finally gets some favorable winds and begins to move quickly. Van Weyden marvels at how fast the ship moves. One night, he is surprised to hear Wolf Larsen quoting poetry, and the two of them talk amiably, again about the value (or worthlessness) of life.

The change to a favorable wind suggests that fortune has turned in Van Weyden's favor again. It also reflects how Wolf Larsen's stormy mood has cleared and become more pleasant.



CHAPTER 8

Van Weyden isn't sure what to make of Wolf Larsen; he can't decide whether Larsen is a genius or a primitive man. The cook Mugridge loses all his money in a card game with Wolf Larsen. Wolf Larsen wins \$185—exactly what was stolen from Van Weyden, but he refuses to give it back. This prompts Larsen and Van Weyden to argue about ethics.

When Larsen wins an amount of money equivalent to that which Mugridge stole from Van Weyden, he's teaching Van Weyden a lesson: Van Weyden could have gotten his money back himself if he'd taken the initiative.



That night, however, Van Weyden deals with the Wolf Larsen and the hunters while Mugridge waits on them. Wolf Larsen and Van Weyden talk about things the hunters don't understand, which angers the hunters.

Wolf Larsen's harsh refusal to hand over Van Weyden's money may seem harsh contrasts with the compassion he exhibits now when he treats Van Weyden well at dinner. This reinforces Larsen's unpredictability. It also suggests Larsen's need to be in control.



CHAPTER 9

Van Weyden gets three days of rest. During this time, he eats with Wolf Larsen and has discussions with him, and Mugridge continues to wait on them. Louis warns Van Weyden that Wolf's mood varies like the weather. Sure enough, during a heated discussion, Van Weyden sees the wild side of Wolf, who leaps up to grab Van Weyden's arm. Though the calm doesn't last, Van Weyden is grateful to have had three days of rest.

This passage shows how Wolf Larsen's unpredictable moods have the potential to benefit Van Weyden—Larsen's temporary good mood allows Van Weyden to move above Mugridge on the social ladder and grants him three days of rest. Nevertheless, Larsen remains unpredictable, and when he violently grips Van Weyden's arm, Van Weyden sees that he must never his guard down around Larsen.



As time passes, Van Weyden begins to think that Mugridge is going mad. Wolf Larsen taunts Van Weyden about his fear, saying that even if Mugridge kills him, it will just get him to heaven faster, since Van Weyden believes in eternal life. Better yet, suggests Wolf Larsen, why doesn't Van Weyden help Mugridge get to heaven?

Wolf Larsen may be partly joking as he taunts Van Weyden to kill Mugridge, but the joke underscores the fact that Larsen places little value on human life.



With no help from Wolf Larsen, Van Weyden continues to manage his tense situation with Mugridge, who very publicly sharpens his knife in the galley. Van Weyden resolves to stop calling Mugridge sir and stop doing extra work for him.

Van Weyden begins to take his first steps toward becoming self-reliant. The fact that Mugridge is sharpening his knife suggests that becoming self-reliant will involve challenges and perhaps even violence.



CHAPTER 10

Van Weyden becomes closer with Wolf Larsen, though he still believes that Larsen sees him as mostly just a toy. Van Weyden also sees that, despite Wolf Larsen's power, the captain is lonely because everyone aboard the *Ghost* fears him.

As Van Weyden gets to know Larsen, he realizes that Larsen is not as fearless as he appears on the surface.



Van Weyden notes that Wolf Larsen is a handsome man with a clean-shaven well-defined face that looks like something from ancient Greece or Rome. Van Weyden asks Wolf Larsen at one point why Larsen isn't out using her talents for something better—he could be doing great things in the world. Larsen references Jesus's Parable of the Sower and says he is like one of the seeds that fell on infertile land.

The Parable of the Sower is a story that Jesus tells in the Christian Bible. In the story, Jesus speaks about a farmer who scattered his seeds around his fields. Many of the seeds fell on bad soil that didn't allow them to survive; only the seeds that fell on good soil were able to grow and prosper. The point of the story is that only people who are prepared to hear the word of God will benefit from it. Wolf Larsen is suggesting that he is like the seeds that fell on bad soil—his conditions haven't permitted him to flourish and use his smarts for good—and he's proud of it.



Wolf Larsen explains to Van Weyden that despite his familiarity with science and literature, he is entirely self-taught. He describes how he became a cabin boy at age 12 in the English merchant service and rose through the ranks. He tells about his brother “Death” Larsen, who is even more brutal and barely reads or writes. Wolf Larsen imagines his brother is happier for not reading.

Wolf Larsen’s self-taught education may have been inspired by Jack London’s own self-taught education. Death Larsen’s fearsome nickname suggests that he is even more violent than Wolf. Perhaps Wolf would have become as cruel as his brother if he hadn’t had the benefit of an education.



CHAPTER 11

The *Ghost* heads to fill its water-casks before continuing to the coast of Japan. Van Weyden asks Louis for more information about Death Larsen, and Louis tells him that Wolf Larsen and Death Larsen don’t get along.

Wolf Larsen takes his self-reliance to an extreme, becoming so independent that he doesn’t even get along with family members.



One day, Van Weyden is surprised to see Wolf Larsen reading the Bible (having finally found one in the possessions of his dead former mate). Wolf Larsen reads aloud from Ecclesiastes. The passage is about how there is “no profit under the sun,” which strikes Wolf Larsen as more pessimistic than anything he himself believes.

Wolf Larsen tries to argue with Van Weyden by using a source that Van Weyden respects (the Bible) to try to justify Larsen’s viewpoint. This passage suggests that Larsen and Van Weyden may perhaps have more in common than it seems, although it also demonstrates Larsen’s tendency to read selectively to find the parts most interesting to him.



Wolf Larsen argues that at some point Van Weyden will start to doubt his immortality and realize that he only has one life on earth to live. Then Wolf Larsen grabs Van Weyden by the throat and chokes him until he passes out. When Van Weyden eventually wakes up, Wolf Larsen asks him if his argument was convincing.

Wolf Larsen’s decision to choke Van Weyden shows that no amount of verbal argument can compete with a stronger foe who is willing to resort to physical violence. This scene is another example of Larsen’s willingness to exercise Darwin’s survival of the fittest concept in his daily life.



CHAPTER 12

Within the past 24 hours, Van Weyden has seen brutality on board the ship that has spread like a disease. The violence comes to a head when the sailor Johnson (not the new mate Johansen) gets into a physical fight with Wolf Larsen. Wolf Larsen easily defeats Johnson, and the violence becomes too much for Van Weyden to watch. Nevertheless, Wolf Larsen forces Van Weyden to watch while he and the mate Johansen continue to beat Johnson.

Wolf Larsen choking Van Weyden has precipitated a new phase of violence on board the ship. When Wolf Larsen fights Johnson, he’s showing his crew—and perhaps Van Weyden in particular—who’s really in charge.



Johnson is so bloody that he’s almost unrecognizable. The cabin boy Leach does what he can to treat Johnson’s wounds. Leach gets angry at Wolf Larsen, becoming surprisingly forceful. Wolf Larsen doesn’t respond, then Mugridge jumps in and starts taunting Leach. Leach responds by beating Mugridge harshly.

*This passage demonstrates how cycles of violence begin. Mugridge was not involved in the conflict initially, but he gets drawn into it, nevertheless. On the *Ghost*, violence spreads as easily as an infectious disease.*



Other sailors also pick fights with each other throughout the day. Van Weyden begins to fear that the brutality will have a negative effect on him, particularly since he found himself actually enjoying the beating of Mugridge.

That Mugridge's beating amuses Van Weyden suggests that Van Weyden is becoming more accustomed to life on the ship; he's now as desensitized to violence as the other sailors.



CHAPTER 13

For three days, Van Weyden does Mugridge's work in addition to his own. On the fourth day, Mugridge must resume his responsibilities, even though he is badly injured. Mugridge complains about how he never had any chance in life. Later, Johnson joins them, despite sustaining serious injuries from the earlier fight. Johnson is meek around Wolf Larsen and Johansen, but Leach remains defiant.

The three days that Van Weyden does Mugridge's work mirrors the three days of rest that Van Weyden had earlier (at Mugridge's expense). The fact that Larsen forces injured sailors to work shows how little compassion Wolf Larsen has for his crew—his only concern is the success of his seafaring excursion, and he doesn't care if that success requires cruelty.



CHAPTER 14

Van Weyden wonders about the mothers of all the men on the *Ghost*. Johansen claims that he hasn't written to his mother in 10 years, and that she must be about 70, though he also claims that people in Sweden grow to be 100 and work the whole time. These are the last words from Johansen that Van Weyden hears.

This section foreshadows that Johansen is going to die. It is ironic that Johansen is talking about Swedish people living to be 100 on the very day he'll die, reflecting the ways in which life can be unpredictable.



Van Weyden gets back to work, but suddenly he sees Wolf Larsen coming over with a head wound and blood on his cheek. Wolf Larsen is looking for Johansen.

*The fact that the strong Wolf Larsen has been wounded suggests that something serious is happening on the *Ghost*—that the crew is at the mercy of powerful forces that even Larsen isn't strong enough to contend with.*



Wolf Larsen goes down to check on which sailors are asleep. Leach knows that he will be caught awake, so he leaps on Wolf Larsen; Johnson joins him. More sailors join the fight (some believing Wolf Larsen is actually Johansen), and the scene becomes a mutiny. Somehow, Wolf Larsen manages to escape his attackers.

This scene shows the danger of Wolf Larsen's style of leadership—a leader rules by fear is always vulnerable to mutinies and uprisings. In this case, however, Wolf Larsen is strong or perhaps lucky enough to get away from his attackers.



CHAPTER 15

Leach, Johnson, and the other mutinying sailors wonder what to do next now that Wolf Larsen got away. A messenger arrives, announcing that Wolf Larsen wants to see Van Weyden in the captain's quarters. Van Weyden agrees to come. He finds that Wolf Larsen is naked and expecting Van Weyden to treat his wounds.

Wolf Larsen's nakedness reflects his new vulnerability. He has just been injured, first by a head wound, then by a mutinying mob, and now the famously self-reliant captain needs help to have his wounds treated.



Van Weyden marvels at Wolf Larsen's muscular body and says God made him well, but Wolf Larsen argues that the only explanation for his strength is its usefulness. Then, he announces that he needs a new mate and that Van Weyden is getting a promotion. Van Weyden tries to protest, but Wolf Larsen's mind seems made up.

Many ocean adventure stories, such as [Moby-Dick](#) by Herman Melville and *Lord Jim* by Joseph Conrad have been interpreted as having elements of homosexual romance beneath the surface, and it is possible to read *The Sea-Wolf* with a similar subtext (since Van Weyden becomes Wolf Larsen's "mate").



CHAPTER 16

Van Weyden finds that the best part of being mate is having no more dishes to wash. He knows little about being a mate, but he gets help from some other sailors, in particularly Louis. The hunters, however, mostly seem to dislike Van Weyden. Despite this, Van Weyden mostly enjoys the beginning of his time as mate and finds that Wolf Larsen is mostly agreeable.

Van Weyden has risen quickly through the ranks of the sailors, which is perhaps more a reflection of his ability to charm Wolf Larsen than it is a reflection of his sailing skills. This could explain why the hunters continue to be suspicious of him.



After the failed mutiny, Johnson is melancholic but Leach holds on to some of his fury. Either would have killed Wolf Larsen, but neither gets the opportunity. Van Weyden wonders why Wolf Larsen doesn't just kill Leach, who makes multiple assassination attempts, but Wolf Larsen even seems to enjoy it.

It may seem strange that Wolf Larsen keeps the openly murderous Johnson and Leach around on the ship, but it soon becomes clear that Larsen is a daredevil who enjoys the risk that comes with keeping them around.



The *Ghost* arrives at the seal-hunting grounds, where it'll remain for three or four months. Leach tells Van Weyden that if he ever makes it back to San Francisco, he should find a man named Matt McCarthy and apologize to him for all the trouble Leach has caused him—Leach doesn't expect to survive the journey back.

The arrival at the seal-hunting grounds marks the end of one phase of the *Ghost's* journey and the beginning of a new one. Leach makes plans for after his death, suggesting that although he and Wolf Larsen disagree on many things, they share a similarly casual attitude toward death.



CHAPTER 17

Van Weyden is surprised that not much happens on the *Ghost* at first. He is also shocked to witness the slaughter of seals, all so that wealthy women can wear the skin.

The slaughter of the seals represents the hidden but violent work that the lower classes must carry out so that the upper classes can enjoy frivolous luxuries.



One day, dark clouds start approaching. Wolf Larsen commands Van Weyden to get ready while the sea is still calm. Soon, however, the storm picks up. Wolf Larsen lets Van Weyden handle the wheel and instructs him on what to do.

The rising winds and brewing storm foreshadow danger ahead. This also offers another instance in which the weather mirrors Wolf Larsen's mood—here, the brewing storm mirrors the inner turmoil of Larsen's chaotic mind.

Wind buffets the *Ghost*, and the ship seems in constant danger of sinking.



The storm gets even worse. A sailor dies while attempting to save a small hunting boat that has been broken. Eventually, the *Ghost's* crew manages to bring the men aboard. Later, Van Weyden tells Wolf Larsen that he doesn't think the broken boat was worth a man's life, but Wolf Larsen replies that the man's life wasn't worth much.

Van Weyden and Wolf Larsen have talked about the value of life in philosophical terms—but this scene proves that Larsen's philosophical disregard extends to reality, as well.



CHAPTER 18

The next day, Van Weyden and Wolf Larsen treat the wounds of Mugridge, who broke his ribs in the storm. They regroup after the storm, collecting men and boats that other schooners had picked up. In the end, they are down four sailors because of the storm.

The losses that the storm causes reflect the harshness of life at sea; they also explain why many of the sailors have such a casual attitude toward death.



Van Weyden learns more about how to be a sailor, particularly during periods when Wolf Larsen has a headache. One day, Leach approaches Van Weyden in secret and asks him how far off the coast they are. Soon, after, a boat, Johnson, and Leach all disappear.

Van Weyden's decision to help Leach and Johnson (who earlier attempted an uprising against Larsen) suggests that despite accepting a position as Wolf Larsen's mate, he still doesn't agree with Larsen's cruel leadership methods.



Furious, Wolf Larsen chases after Leach and Johnson, who have escaped. They come upon a boat, and Van Weyden is so afraid of what Wolf Larsen might do to Leach and Johnson that he readies his gun. As it turns out, however, it is a different boat with four men and a woman in it.

Wolf Larsen searches for one boat but finds another; this further exemplifies how life at sea can be unpredictable. The fact that Van Weyden is potentially willing to use a gun against Larsen shows how life at sea has changed him: he's far more accepting of violence than he was before.



Wolf Larsen asks Van Weyden to take the woman, whose name is Maud Brewster, to the spare port cabin. Maud Brewster asks what will happen to her, and Van Weyden admits that there is no telling what Wolf Larsen will do, although he tries to reassure her. Van Weyden leaves her to sleep and recover.

Maud Brewster is significant because she's the story's first and only major female character. Even more so than Van Weyden, she is an outsider on the masculine-dominated ship, and her arrival marks a major shift in the story.



CHAPTER 19

Later, Wolf Larsen catches Leach and Johnson in their small escape boat. Van Weyden learns that the four men and Maud Brewster were on a mail steamer heading from San Francisco to Yokohama before it wrecked in the typhoon. Van Weyden tries to convince Wolf Larsen to be merciful to Leach and Johnson. Wolf Larsen promises not to lay a hand on Leach or Johnson. Instead, he leaves them in their small boat and speeds away. They are lost in a squall and presumably die.

Larsen's literal interpretation of Weyden's request not to touch Leach or Johnson and leads to them (probably) dying at sea—the exact opposite of what Van Weyden intended. This discrepancy shows that while Van Weyden might be more accustomed to violence, he's nowhere near as cruel as Larsen. Larsen's decision to abandon Leach and Johnson gives them the opportunity to survive if they're fit enough, but arguably they were never given a chance to survive in the first place. This contradiction illustrates the limitations of Larsen's literalist interpretation of Darwin's concept of "survival of the fittest."



CHAPTER 20

Maud Brewster continues to sleep. Wolf Larsen puts the other men (three oilers and an engineer) to work. Maud Brewster asks to be let off the vessel, but Wolf Larsen forbids her, saying she should just get used to it. Maud Brewster asks Van Weyden what she can do to be useful but finds that she doesn't have much relevant experience for the ship.

Now that Van Weyden has gotten used to life aboard the Ghost, it's his responsibility to show Maud Brewster how things work. This further shows how he has changed as a character—he's now performing the role that Louis played for him when he first arrived on the Ghost.



Maud Brewster recognizes Van Weyden as someone who wrote a positive review of one of her poetry volumes. It comforts her to find someone she knows, though she remains apprehensive about Wolf Larsen.

Coincidence plays a big role in the story, and one of the biggest coincidences is that in fact Maud Brewster and Van Weyden are already familiar with each other from their previous careers in literature.



CHAPTER 21

Wolf Larsen becomes frustrated when Maud Brewster and Van Weyden ignore him in conversation. He takes out his anger on Mugridge, who runs around the ship to try to escape punishment, hurting the other sailors in the process. Ultimately, Wolf Larsen throws Mugridge into the sea. Mugridge nearly drowns, and a shark bites off his foot. Seeing this violence shocks Maud Brewster. Van Weyden does what he can to stop the bleeding and treat Mugridge's wound.

Though Wolf Larsen is well-read, he's frustrated to find that he can't talk about books on the same level as Brewster and Van Weyden, whose class privilege has afforded them formal educations. One might interpret Wolf Larsen's encouragement of the violence against Mugridge as Larsen redirecting the frustration about Maud and Van Weyden's rejection.



CHAPTER 22

Maud Brewster accuses Van Weyden of standing by while two men (Leach and Johnson) were murdered (Wolf Larsen left them to drown.) Van Weyden asks what he should have done instead. He tells Maud Brewster that things are different on the *Ghost* and that she would do best to try to blend in.

Van Weyden finds himself in the unusual position of going along with Wolf Larsen's actions while also being unable to defend them. His time aboard the Ghost has made him more willing to compromise his morals, for better or for worse.



CHAPTER 23

Seal hunting on the *Ghost* continues to be perilous. Meanwhile, Van Weyden thinks of sea romances he's read before and fantasizes about running away with Maud Brewster. He notes how Maud Brewster and Wolf Larsen are almost exactly the opposites of each other. Van Weyden, who has always admired Maud Brewster's poetry, now realizes that he loves her.

Many characters in *The Sea-Wolf* are influenced by the books they've read. Here, Van Weyden uses sea romances to better understand his own situation. Books are also an important part of Brewster and Van Weyden's relationship—they know each other from the literary world, and this connection seems to influence Van Weyden's love for Brewster.



CHAPTER 24

In retrospect, Van Weyden has a particularly strong memory of the events that occurred immediately after he realized that he loved Maud Brewster. A new ship approaches the *Ghost*, and Van Weyden worries it might be a Russian cruiser, since Wolf Larsen has a reputation for as a poacher. Wolf Larsen, however, believes the approaching ship is the *Macedonia*, the ship of his brother, Death Larsen—and he's correct.

The name "Death" Larsen suggests that this character's arrival will be a dangerous time. The name of Death Larsen's ship—the *Macedonia*—recalls the famous general Alexander the Great (who was from Macedonia) and suggests that Death Larsen intends to rule the seas like a general from classical times.



The *Macedonia* has more boats than the *Ghost*, allowing it to hunt far more **seals** than the *Ghost*—and leaving very few seals behind for Wolf Larsen and his crew to hunt. Wolf Larsen and Maud Brewster argue about eternal life. Like Van Weyden, Maud Brewster believes in a soul, but Wolf Larsen remains committed to his materialism (the philosophy that only the physical world exists and that there are no souls or heaven).

Perhaps because Death Larsen is more ruthless and uncompromising than his brother Wolf, Death comes to the confrontation with more resources. He tries to dominate Wolf in the same way that Wolf tries to dominate his own crew, showing how in a survival-of-the-fittest contest, there will almost always be someone even higher up on the food chain.



CHAPTER 25

The next day, Van Weyden informs Wolf Larsen that Death Larsen's *Macedonia* is no longer in sight; Wolf Larsen seems almost disappointed. Soon, however, the *Macedonia* appears again and continues to hog the hunting grounds.

The fact that Wolf Larsen is disappointed about escaping his better-equipped brother reaffirms Wolf's tendency to thrive in life-or-death situations.



Wolf Larsen pulls the *Ghost* up next to one of the hunting boats of the *Macedonia*. He invites the three hunters in the boat, including one large Scandinavian, aboard the *Ghost*. Wolf Larsen invites the big Scandinavian below decks while telling Van Weyden and Maud Brewster to stay above decks. Van Weyden and Maud Brewster hear the sound of fighting coming from below.

Even though he's at a disadvantage, Wolf Larsen is eager to prove that he can defeat his brother Death. Death's nickname is no accident, since in a broader sense, Wolf Larsen has committed his life to overcoming death—to surviving and proving that he is the fittest.



Wolf Larsen comes up alone and tells the remaining two men from the hunting boat to hoist up their boat. He warns them that they might have to sail with him for a long time. Wolf Larsen's men begin a fight with the remaining hunting boats from the *Macedonia*. By the time the fight is over, the Ghost's crew has captured two more *Macedonia* boats, bringing the total number of captured boats to seven.

The *Macedonia* starts heading for the *Ghost*, and Death Larsen has apparently realized what is happening. The *Ghost* tries to speed away, but Wolf Larsen warns his hunters to ready their guns. The *Macedonia* opens fire on the *Ghost* from its small cannon, but there is no rifle, since the hunters are either already on the *Ghost* or still out on their hunting boats. The *Ghost* enters some fog and seems to escape.

CHAPTER 26

Wolf Larsen distributes whiskey to his crew while Van Weyden treats the newly wounded. Wolf Larsen's victory over Death Larsen seems to put him in a good mood.

Wolf Larsen, Van Weyden, and Maud Brewster talk about why humans do things; Wolf Larsen argues that desire motivates people, but Maude Brewster thinks that the soul is really what determines a person's behavior. Van Weyden says they're both right and that desire and the soul are the same thing.

Wolf Larsen, Maud Brewster, and Van Weyden continue to discuss philosophy and literature, including the figure of Lucifer in Milton's [Paradise Lost](#). Wolf Larsen defends Lucifer, and Maud Brewster says that Wolf Larsen is Lucifer.

The fact that Wolf Larsen captures Death's crew despite having fewer resources than Death demonstrates how survival isn't just about brute strength—cunning and strategy can also play a role. This scene also shows what little regard the brothers have for human life—the hunters are just pawns in Wolf and Death's competition,



Wolf Larsen wins this confrontation, but only by chance—Death's crew wasn't expecting the attack. The fact that the Macedonia fires a cannon at the Ghost highlights that this is not just a friendly competition between brothers but a real battle that they're willing to fight to the death. Wolf's willingness to kill his brother reflects his extreme commitment to a survival-of-the-fittest mentality.



Again, Death Larsen's name has a double meaning. Wolf Larsen celebrates overcoming Death, but he also celebrates overcoming death.



This conversation illustrates how Van Weyden has changed from his time on the Ghost. At the beginning of his journey, he was the opposite of Larsen, but Maud Brewster's arrival and with how Van Weyden has changed from being a sailor, he now finds himself in the middle between Larsen and Brewster.



Lucifer (the character in Milton's [Paradise Lost](#), which retells the Biblical creation story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden) has a reputation as a rebel and an individualist. Though Satan is the villain of the original story, some later writers and critics have interpreted Milton's Satan more sympathetically, either as a tragic figure or even as a hero. Wolf Larsen seems to share the view of some of these later critics, seeing Lucifer as a character who represents self-reliance (as well as rejection of God).



Wolf Larsen says he'll go relieve Louis on the wheel and suggests that Van Weyden go to bed. But after Van Weyden goes to bed, he wakes up and goes out, only to find Maud Brewster struggling to get out of the embrace of Wolf Larsen. Van Weyden draws his knife and strikes a glancing blow on Wolf Larsen's shoulder blade. Van Weyden prepares to deliver a more serious blow, but Maud Brewster urges him to stop.

Once again, Wolf Larsen's moods are mysterious—it doesn't make sense that Wolf would assault Maud Brewster so soon after they've had a pleasant conversation. This passage also recalls the earlier passage where Larsen chokes Van Weyden during an argument. In both situations, Larsen resorts to physical violence when he can't dominate his opponent mentally.



Wolf Larsen seems suddenly much weaker and says he is a sick man, repeating it several times. Van Weyden leads him off to his bunk. Once he has put Wolf Larsen to bed, Van Weyden comes back to Maud Brewster and says that the only thing left for the two of them is to make a 600-mile escape journey in a boat. They steal some supplies, lower a boat, and head for Japan.

While Van Weyden has interpreted Wolf Larsen's headaches and bad moods as a symptom of melancholy, this passage seems to suggest that Larsen's ailment might have a physical origin, too. Van Weyden's decision to escape with Maud Brewster shows that he has internalized Wolf Larsen's ideas about self-reliance so well that he is ready to leave Larsen himself behind.



CHAPTER 27

With good **wind**, Van Weyden and Maud Brewster are five days away from Japan, but if it storms hard, their small boat might not make it. Maud lets down her hair, then says that she wants to learn how to steer, since Van Weyden can't keep steering forever without sleeping.

Van Weyden and Maud Brewster's reliance on the wind reinforces how chance governs human life. Now that they have escaped the Ghost, Brewster and Van Weyden have their first opportunity to see what it's like to be self-reliant.



Van Weyden goes to sleep. When he wakes up seven hours later, he's surprised to find that Maud Brewster has been steering the whole time. Soon, however, the **wind** begins to blow the wrong way, forcing them to drop anchor. Van Weyden fears that the changing winds may cause them to lose their bearings.

Like Van Weyden, Maud Brewster finds that she has strength and knowledge that she never knew about. Still, the changing winds at the end of the chapter suggest a possible end to Van Weyden and Brewster's string of good luck.



CHAPTER 28

Van Weyden and Maud Brewster suffer in the small boat and drift around for many hours. It begins to storm, and both Maud and Van Weyden are in bad condition. The whole time Van Weyden is tempted to profess his love for Maud, but he keeps holding back.

Van Weyden and Maud Brewster's current predicament shows how they are subject to the random whims of fate. Van Weyden's inability to express his feelings for Brewster suggests one aspect of his character where he hasn't grown, perhaps because the sailors on the Ghost had little to teach him about romance or complex emotions in general.



After days of storm, Van Weyden and Maud Brewster find themselves unexpectedly off what seems to be the coast of Alaska. Neither can swim, so they'll have to get ashore in the boat. The boat makes a perilous trip through rocky waters before landing on the shore of a place they'll eventually call Endeavour Island.

The rocky waters of the shore represent the harsh difficulties that Van Weyden and Brewster have ahead of them. Meanwhile, their inability to swim shows how their wealthy backgrounds have left them unprepared for these challenges.



CHAPTER 29

On the island, Van Weyden curses himself for not thinking to bring matches. However, soon after, Van Weyden succeeds in making fire with some paper from a notebook, a shotgun shell, and a knife. He and Maud Brewster make coffee.

The ability to create fire was a turning point in ancient human history; Van Weyden's ability to make fire shows that he has passed the first major test of survival.



While exploring the island, Van Weyden and Maud Brewster find the remains of a wrecked boat. Van Weyden tells Maud the boat's sailors must have gotten away, but he suspects their bones might still be somewhere on the island. Endeavour Island turns out to be small without much on it. Van Weyden realizes that with Maud on the island with him, he's responsible for another person for the first time in his life.

Being on the island challenges some of Wolf Larsen's ideas about individualism and self-reliance. As Van Weyden learns, being responsible for other people can be more challenging than being responsible for oneself, though the challenge also comes with potential rewards.



CHAPTER 30

Van Weyden and Maud Brewster spend two weeks on Endeavour Island trying to build a hut. If they want seal skin for the roof of the hut, Van Weyden will have to club seals, since shooting damages the pelts. As he goes to club a big bull seal, however, he hesitates, and the powerful seal comes after him; Van Weyden runs away.

Separated from society—even the society of the Ghost—Van Weyden and Brewster are forced to rebuild a civilization from scratch. Though Van Weyden used to condemn the clubbing of seals, being at sea has changed his stance: now, he sees the seal pelts as a key survival resource, not a luxury.



Maud doesn't want to continue clubbing the seals, but Van Weyden continues, this time going for a smaller female seal. But again, the big bull male comes after him. Maud overcomes some of her initial hesitation and helps Van Weyden strategize for the next attempt.

This passage shows the difficulty of surviving in nature. Even though Van Weyden has put aside his distaste for violence, he must still use all his strength and ingenuity to overcome the seals.



Van Weyden and Maud Brewster herd some younger male seals without mates away from their companions and begin clubbing them. Maud even joins in, leaving some of the weak-looking seals but clubbing the stronger ones that try to escape. She finds it exciting and feels very far away from the world of books. Van Weyden almost calls Maud "my woman, my mate" but chickens out and compliments her ability to endure hardship instead.

That Van Weyden has managed to kill the seals shows how much he's grown as a character, but it also shows how this growth comes with consequences. By killing the seals, Van Weyden and Brewster lose some of their innocence and sensitivity. Though Van Weyden still disagrees with many of Wolf Larsen's survivalist philosophies, killing the seals shows him firsthand what survival of the fittest looks like and, perhaps, helps him to better understand Larsen's viewpoint.



CHAPTER 31

Van Weyden and Maud Brewster complete their **seal**-skin roof. They build a second hut right next to the first. Van Weyden feels that something bad may happen soon but isn't sure what. Van Weyden and Maud are now on a first-name basis.

This short passage shows how the challenges Van Weyden and Brewster face—as well as their triumphs over the challenges—have brought them closer together.



CHAPTER 32

Van Weyden wakes up feeling that something is missing—he realizes that what's missing is the **wind**. He goes outside his cabin and is shocked to find the *Ghost*.

Normally, strong winds accompany sudden reversals of fortune. Here, though, the lack of wind could suggest disorientation, adding a sense of drama.



Nothing is moving on the *Ghost*. Van Weyden thinks that the crew might still be asleep—which means that he and Maud Brewster might still have time to escape. Instead, he decides to creep aboard the ship with his knife and shotgun and kill Wolf Larsen.

Earlier, Van Weyden ran away from the Ghost in an escape boat; now, he's ready to face his fears. This shows how his time on the island has strengthened and emboldened him.



Van Weyden boards the *Ghost* cautiously but finds that it seems to be deserted. Overjoyed, Van Weyden makes plans to cook a surprise breakfast for Maud Brewster. Before he can, though, he runs into Wolf Larsen.

The name of the Ghost becomes particularly appropriate in this passage: the ship is as empty as a ghost town, and Wolf Larsen seems to haunt Van Weyden everywhere he goes.



Van Weyden levels his shotgun at Wolf Larsen. He hesitates for a while, and Wolf Larsen asks him why he doesn't shoot already. Wolf Larsen tells Van Weyden that his conventional morality won't allow him to kill an unarmed man, even though Wolf Larsen himself wouldn't hesitate to do so in the right situation. Van Weyden doesn't shoot, but he keeps his gun up.

The fact that Van Weyden hesitates before shooting Wolf Larsen shows that they are not the same—that even with his newfound self-reliance, Van Weyden isn't willing to shoot an unarmed opponent. Arguably, Van Weyden displays an even higher level of self-reliance, since he has moved beyond his teacher, Wolf Larsen.



Van Weyden asks where the rest of Wolf Larsen's crew is. It turns out Death Larsen caught up with the *Ghost*, offered to pay the crew more money, then marooned Wolf alone on the *Ghost*. Before leaving, Mugridge sabotaged the sails by cutting them.

Again, Death's name is a sort of play on words; Wolf Larsen has tried—and failed—to outrun Death. His failure suggests that even the strongest people can't outrun death forever.



Wolf Larsen still claims to be weak from headaches. Van Weyden lets him go, but makes sure to take all of his revolvers and knives. Van Weyden goes back to Maud Brewster and they have breakfast as usual. Right at the end she notices the *Ghost* and Van Weyden informs her that Wolf Larsen is aboard.

*Wolf Larsen's weakness from headaches, while definitely a physical disease, might also represent how his ego and overconfidence (both associated with the brain) weaken him. It becomes clear that, without his crew, the Wolf Larsen that Van Weyden and Maud Brewster find on the abandoned *Ghost* is not the towering captain he used to be.*



CHAPTER 33

Van Weyden and Maud Brewster wait all day for Wolf Larsen to come out, but he doesn't come out or even appear on deck. There's no sign of Wolf Larsen for two days, and they wonder if he is dead or dying of his headaches.

*Wolf Larsen continues to act as a ghost-like figure on the *Ghost*, seemingly disappearing without leaving a trace but still haunting Van Weyden and Brewster as they try to go about their lives.*



Though Maud Brewster was initially afraid of Wolf Larsen, after more time passes, she tells Van Weyden to go aboard and check on him. Van Weyden goes aboard and finds Wolf Larsen where he left him, in a bad mood. After a short conversation, Van Weyden heads back to Maud.

Tension builds as Wolf Larsen continues to remain off the coast of the island without indicating what his intentions are. It's clear that some final confrontation may need to occur to resolve the conflict between Larsen and Van Weyden, but it isn't clear what form the confrontation will take.



A week goes by, and the only sign of Wolf Larsen is some occasional smoke coming up from the galley of the *Ghost*. Soon, though, even the smoke stops. Before Maud Brewster can say anything, Van Weyden decides to go check on Wolf Larsen again.

Wolf Larsen's occasional smoke signals show how even though he and Van Weyden are on the same island, they can only communicate from a distance. This situation perhaps symbolizes the philosophical distance that defines their relationship.



Van Weyden watches Wolf Larsen in secret. Wolf seems to be in a state of total despair and barely manage to compose himself. Suddenly, Wolf Larsen notices an open trap door and realizes Van Weyden is somewhere aboard.

This passage shows that Wolf Larsen is not always as strong and confident as he tries to appear—when he thinks nobody is watching him, he expresses visible despair and pain.



Wolf Larsen believes Van Weyden is belowdecks, so he closes the trap door and puts a heavy chest over it. As Van Weyden watches Wolf Larsen move, he realizes that Wolf is now blind. He goes back to report the news to Maud Brewster.

This passage displays Wolf Larsen's extraordinary willpower. Even though he is blind and weakened by illness, he is nevertheless determined to overcome Van Weyden.



CHAPTER 34

Maud Brewster says it's a shame the *Ghost* doesn't have a mast—if it did, they could sail away on the ship. Van Weyden wonders if there's a way to fix the masts. He and Maud make plans and discuss what to do with blind Wolf Larsen.

Van Weyden and Maud Brewster begin repairing the *Ghost*. Wolf Larsen comes out and asks what they're doing. He is pleased that Van Weyden is trying to stand on his own legs but doubts he'll succeed. Wolf Larsen says he forbids anyone from touching his ship.

Wolf Larsen then greets Maud Brewster, unable to see her in his blindness but having heard her breathing. Van Weyden asks why Wolf Larsen doesn't want to escape with them, but Wolf Larsen just says he intends to die there on the ship.

Brewster provides the inspiration for many of Van Weyden's ideas on the island, showing how cooperation can lead to new discoveries.



Wolf Larsen's speech here illustrates his many contradictions. On the one hand, he wants Van Weyden to succeed, but on the other, he wants to stop Van Weyden from doing what he needs to do to succeed. Much of Larsen's misery seems to come from his inability to navigate his competing desires.



Though it might make sense for Wolf Larsen to try to escape with Brewster and Van Weyden, Larsen is too set in his pessimistic ways to join them. Perhaps he even feels that he deserves death because he was bested by Death Larson.



CHAPTER 35

Van Weyden and Maud Brewster get a mast aboard the *Ghost* and hoist it. While they're working on repairing the masts, Wolf Larsen comes out again. Van Weyden and Maud Brewster work hard all day. After supper, Van Weyden says they should remain wary of Wolf Larsen, even though he's blind. He plans to take away Wolf Larsen's boat to ensure the captain can't come ashore.

When Van Weyden and Maud Brewster wake the next day, they find that Wolf Larsen has sabotaged some of their work. Van Weyden says Wolf deserves to die, but he doesn't have it in him to do the killing. When he and Maud go aboard, Van Weyden says they shouldn't let Wolf know that they know what he did. They take off their shoes and creep around the deck, avoiding Wolf, then they steal his small boat.

Van Weyden and Maud Brewster once again demonstrate all that cooperation can accomplish. Van Weyden's wariness toward Wolf Larsen shows that he has learned not to underestimate the captain—that even blindness is not enough to stop the ambitions of Wolf Larsen.



Wolf Larsen seems to be acting out of pure spite: he has nothing to gain by sabotaging Van Weyden's work and only does so to make Van Weyden suffer more. Though having power over others might have helped Wolf Larsen become powerful before, now, it just leads to empty destruction.



CHAPTER 36

For two days, Van Weyden and Maud Brewster search at sea and on beaches for the missing masts. They find them on the third day and bring them aboard the *Ghost*. Van Weyden begins having second thoughts about how they will fare at sea compared to on the island, but Maud Brewster encourages him to continue.

The fact that Van Weyden and Maud Brewster search for the masts for three days illustrates their determination to escape the island and survive. Once again, Brewster demonstrates the power of cooperation by motivating Van Weyden to continue.



Maud Brewster talks about how she used to be in poor health, and she was traveling to Japan because doctors recommended a long sea voyage. Van Weyden compliments her on how brave she's become.

Brewster's restored health suggests that desperate conditions can help people to find strength they didn't realize they had.



Van Weyden and Maud Brewster again attempt to repair the masts on the *Ghost*. This time, they remain on the ship to guard their work against Wolf Larsen. Wolf Larsen can hear them, but he only talks casually with them.

Van Weyden and Brewster demonstrate determination by redoing their work and trying again. As is often the case, Wolf Larsen hides his intentions, building tension and a sense of mystery.



One night, as Wolf Larsen attempts to sabotage Van Weyden and Maud Brewster's work again, Van Weyden catches him in the act and confronts him. Wolf Larsen dares Van Weyden to kill him, but Van Weyden says he'll only do so if Wolf attempts to cut the mast. Wolf backs down and doesn't attempt to cut the mast.

Wolf Larsen's motivations remain mysterious. It isn't clear if he is attempting to trick Van Weyden or if he realizes he is dying and no longer values even his own life.



Maud Brewster and Van Weyden discuss what to do with Wolf Larsen. But as it turns out, when they are working the next day, they see that Wolf Larsen is so feeble he can barely walk. Van Weyden wonders if Wolf is faking it.

Wolf Larsen projects such a powerful spirit that even when he can barely walk, Van Weyden is wary of him. Again, Van Weyden's inability to read Larsen builds tension.



Van Weyden goes to check on Wolf Larsen, but he gets too close, and Wolf grabs him and tries to choke him. Maud Brewster screams and tries in vain to help while Van Weyden begins to lose consciousness. Suddenly, however, Wolf Larsen goes limp and his grip on Van Weyden's throat loosens.

The tension comes to a climax as Wolf Larsen reveals he still has life in him after all. At the same time, however, Larsen is unable to overcome physical weakness. Finally, Larsen's attempt to choke Van Weyden demonstrates his tendency to resort to physical violence when he can't overpower people with words.



As Van Weyden returns to his senses, he realizes that Maud Brewster was holding a **seal** club, ready to attack Wolf Larsen. Van Weyden explains that Wolf had another attack like the one that initially made him blind. They tie Wolf Larsen up and put him in handcuffs in steerage.

The fact that Maud Brewster is holding a seal club shows that even she has changed and is potentially willing to use violence when necessary. It's noteworthy that she goes for the seal club, since killing the seals is what forced Van Weyden and Brewster to resort to violence in the first place.



CHAPTER 37

Van Weyden and Maud Brewster move aboard the *Ghost*, with Wolf Larsen as their prisoner. Van Weyden discovers that Wolf Larsen is deaf in one ear, and Wolf Larsen tells him that he is in fact paralyzed and will never walk again. Though Van Weyden is wary that Wolf is faking, when Wolf smiles, only part of his face moves, suggesting that the paralysis is real. Van Weyden asks what has caused all these attacks, and Wolf says his brain, perhaps a tumor or cancer.

Despite being close to death, Wolf Larsen maintains that he doesn't have a soul. Van Weyden tells Wolf Larsen that his smile is crooked. He removes Wolf Larsen's handcuffs, but he and Maud Brewster are still afraid of what Wolf could do, even though they know he's helpless.

Van Weyden makes some final repairs on the sails and believes everything is now close to being in shape to work. He and Maud Brewster are happy, but Wolf Larsen's slow death frequently interrupts this happiness. Wolf Larsen has another stroke and begins losing his ability to speak. Eventually, he can only communicate "yes" and "no" by pressure from his hand or by writing with his left hand.

Van Weyden and Maud Brewster complete their work on the masts. But just as they do so, they see dense smoke coming from steerage. Van Weyden goes belowdecks and nearly chokes as he finds Wolf Larsen almost motionless but still responsive to touch. He goes back up without locating the exact source of the smoke.

Van Weyden returns to Wolf Larsen and discovers that the captain had set fire to his bunk's straw mattress. He drags the mattress out and puts out the fire. Wolf is unconscious but later writes to Van Weyden that, despite his weakness, he can think more clearly than he's been able to at any point in his life.

Wolf Larsen's sharp physical decline shows that no amount of strength or determination can combat age and disease. Though Wolf Larsen is no longer the strong man he used to be, his strange smile suggests that a disbelief in the soul may have prepared him for what will happen when his body decays.



The fact that Wolf Larsen doesn't change any of his philosophies, even in the face of death, shows just how uncompromising he is. Though Larsen is a deeply flawed character, his consistency is one of his positive qualities.



As his illness progresses, Wolf Larsen loses more of his identity. Though Larsen no longer intimidates Van Weyden and Brewster physically, he continues to disturb them, perhaps in part because his condition reminds them of their own mortality.



*The smoke from below decks recalls the smoke that appeared when the *Ghost* first came to Endeavour Island—back then, smoke was the only sign that Larsen was still alive. It is fitting that as Larsen loses his other ways to communicate, he is still able to communicate from a distance with smoke.*



The fact that Wolf Larsen can still start fires suggests that he still has some life in him. Learning how to make fire on Endeavour Island was a triumph for Van Weyden, and in a twisted way, Larsen's ability to start a fire while half-paralyzed and blind is impressive, representing one last burst of vitality. That Van Weyden manages to put out the first fire suggests that Larsen is past his prime and will only continue to decline.



CHAPTER 38

Wolf Larsen writes to Van Weyden that his left side is going too; soon, he will be fully paralyzed. Later, he painfully writes “But I am still here, all here,” in text that is difficult to read. Maud Brewster asks Wolf Larsen if he has used his new concentration to contemplate the idea of immortality, but Wolf simply writes in big letters “B-O-S-H.”

Van Weyden asks Wolf Larsen if he can still hear, and Wolf doesn't respond, suggesting that both arms are now fully paralyzed. Wolf's lip, however, still moves just a little. Van Weyden and Maud Brewster ask Wolf questions about food and confirm that he can still hear and respond to them.

Maud Brewster says she wishes everything would end soon, saying that she is only “one, small woman.” Van Weyden recognizes the phrase and asks where she got it; Maud suggests she might have heard Van Weyden use it in his sleep. It was also the name her father called her mother.

Van Weyden and Maud Brewster finish up with the sails. Van Weyden checks in on the weakening Wolf Larsen and asks him if he's still there: Wolf's lips move for the last time to say “Yes.”

“Bosh” is British slang that basically means “nonsense.” By writing “bosh,” Wolf Larsen is indicating that he still doesn't believe in the idea of souls or immortal life. Perhaps he is even suggesting that life itself is “bosh,” meaning that in the end, life is meaningless to him—a sentiment that he expressed often, when he could still speak.



Wolf Larsen's tiny lip movements illustrate how determined he is to hold onto life, even as death becomes inevitable.



Wolf Larsen seems to be the final obstacle between Brewster and Van Weyden and freedom. Now that Larsen is almost dead, they can begin to think of their life on land again.



When Wolf Larsen says that he's still there, he is literally answering Van Weyden's question, but he is also reaffirming his belief that his whole identity is trapped in his weakened body (and that there is no soul or part of himself that isn't inside the body)



CHAPTER 39

Van Weyden and Maud Brewster have finally gotten the *Ghost* ready to leave Endeavour Island. They bid the island farewell and head off with a heavy **wind**. Because Van Weyden is the only one strong enough to handle the wheel at such strong winds, he pulls a 36-hour shift at the wheel.

Van Weyden and Maud Brewster continue to experience strong **winds**, and the conditions push the limits of Van Weyden's physical endurance. One morning, Van Weyden wakes and finds that Maud isn't making breakfast as usual. He searches and finds her near Wolf Larsen, who apparently died during the storm. Maud suggests that Wolf is still alive because now—in death—his spirit is free.

The strong wind poses a final challenge to Van Weyden and Brewster, forcing Van Weyden to perform one last feat of extreme physical endurance.



It is appropriate that Wolf Larsen, whose defining feature is his stormy and unpredictable disposition, dies during a storm. It's also apt that he dies alone—he spent so much of his life (psychologically) alone, even when he was surrounded by a crew of other sailors.



The storm breaks, and Van Weyden and Maud Brewster have a funeral at sea for Wolf Larsen. Afterward, they throw his body into the ocean.

Wolf Larsen's burial at sea recalls the funeral for the deceased mate that happened at the very beginning of Van Weyden's ocean journey, suggesting that a cycle has been completed.



After the funeral, Van Weyden and Maud Brewster see a ship from the United States, and Van Weyden raises a distress flag. Van Weyden calls Maud his “one small woman” again and asks to kiss her before the rescue boat comes.

The book's happy ending suggests that fate has rewarded Van Weyden and Maud Brewster's perseverance and ingenuity. The ending celebrates growth and self-reliance without necessarily endorsing Wolf Larsen's cruel version of self-reliance.





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