

“I Pray the Lord My Work’s All Right”: Economic Themes in Jack London’s “The Apostate”

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RÉSUMÉ

“L’Apostat” de Jack London montre comment la mécanisation du travail restreint la portée des possibilités ouvertes à Johnny, un adolescent qui travaille en usine. Basé sur des récits d’époque portant sur le travail des enfants, “L’Apostat” s’intéresse au climat économique qui engendre de tels abus et empêche, contrairement au principe du Rêve américain, l’évolution du protagoniste. Par sa façon d’aborder le thème, London offre une critique virulente du capitalisme qui insiste sur la nécessité d’améliorer les conditions de la classe ouvrière. Cette idée se voit renforcée lorsque, suite à une maladie, Johnny doit quitter le monde urbain de la production industrielle pour celui de la nature. Le développement qui s’ensuit suggère qu’une transformation de l’environnement peut élargir le champ des possibilités pour les pauvres.

Jack London’s “The Apostate,” which first appeared in the September 1906 issue of the *Woman’s Home Companion*, chronicles the experiences of a young worker, Johnny, within the monotonous routine of industrial production. The story has received little scholarly attention, and the few appraisals of the narrative analyze it in relation to reformist movements in the early twentieth century.¹ James I. McClintock argues that the work is simply “a muck-raking story attacking the inadequacy of child-labor legislation and an irreverent social commentary that it is preferable to be a tramp than a work beast.”² Further, Jeanne Campbell Reesman observes that London provides “a depressing portrait of the life-numbing reality of child labor as well as a romantic American escape from such slavery.”³ This injustice is central to “The Apostate,” yet the representation of this particular subject possesses broader ramifications through its engagement with the American Dream. In *The Epic of America*, James Truslow Adams defines this concept as “the dream of a land in which life should be fuller for every man with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” as a result of “a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth

¹ Only three articles devote significant attention to “The Apostate”: Steven T. Dhondt, “‘There is a Good Time Coming’: Jack London’s Spirit of Proletarian Revolt,” *Jack London Newsletter* 3 (1970): 25-34; Leonard Cassuto, “Jack London’s Class-Based Grotesque,” *Literature and the Grotesque*, ed. Michael J. Meyer (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995) 113-28; and Jeanne Campbell Reesman, “Frank Norris and Jack London,” *A Companion to the American Short Story*, ed. Alfred Bendixen and James Nagel (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) 171-86. While these readings effectively trace the political arguments that frame “The Apostate,” these critics do not examine the text in relation to the American Dream, and they do not connect London’s representation of child labor to a critique of the economic system that conditions such abuses.

² James I. McClintock, *Jack London’s Strong Truths* (East Lansing, US: Michigan State University Press, 1997) 129.

³ Jeanne Campbell Reesman, *Jack London: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne, 1999) 87.

or position.”⁴ “The Apostate,” however, presents a vision of American society that imposes significant barriers to mobility for the poor. In this context, the depiction of Johnny’s inability to improve his class position expresses a trenchant critique of capitalism due to its human consequences, emphasizing the need for social change to facilitate the advancement associated with the national success story. The protagonist’s mechanization and the deterioration of his intellectual capabilities reinforce these themes, while the central character’s flight signifies that his development is not possible within the existing economic framework.

“The Apostate” resulted from London’s inability to accept an invitation to visit southern textile mills.⁵ Instead, he created a narrative that dramatized comparable injustices through the fate of the protagonist, whose experiences originate from the author’s employment as a factory worker beginning in 1891. Discussing his job at the R. Hickmott Canning Company, London wrote: “I was up and at work at six in the morning. I took half an hour for dinner. I took half an hour for supper. I worked every night till ten, eleven, twelve o’clock. My wages were small, but I worked such long hours that I sometimes made as high as fifty dollars a month.”⁶ The time spent at his machine prevented London from exploring the Oakland Estuary and reading the books set before him by Ina Coolbrith, a librarian at the Oakland Free Library and later the poet laureate of California. Reflecting on this period, London observed:

I asked myself if this were to be the meaning of life – to be a work-beast? I knew of no horse in the city of Oakland that worked the hours I worked. If this were living, I was entirely unenamored of it. [...] There was only one way to escape my deadening toil. I must get out and away on the water.⁷

This contrast between the deadening routine of industrial production in the urban realm and the restorative power of nature suggests the thematic contours of “The Apostate.” London augmented these autobiographical elements with evidence drawn from periodical accounts of child labor, and his files at the Huntington Library feature numerous articles that anticipate the central ideas and concrete details of the story.⁸

These sources and experiences provide the empirical foundation for “The Apostate,” which inverts the contours of the American Dream as Johnny’s attempts to improve his prospects do not engender mobility but instead intensify his exploitation. London’s emphasis on the national success story emerges in the opening of the story when Johnny’s mother exclaims, “If you don’t git up Johnny, I won’t give you a bite to eat.”⁹ The mother’s threat alludes to Horatio Alger, Jr.’s *Ragged Dick*, which begins with “Wake up there, youngster, [...] I suppose you’d lay there all day if I hadn’t called you.”¹⁰ This connection positions “The Apostate” against the conventional ideas of economic progress associated with Alger, whose novels emphasize the

⁴ James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Garden City, US: Blue Ribbon Books, 1931) 404.

⁵ James L. Haley, *Wolf: The Lives of Jack London* (New York: Basic Books, 2010) 235.

⁶ Jack London, Letter to Mabel Applegarth, 30 November 1898, *The Letters of Jack London*, eds. Earle Labor, Robert C. Leitz, III, and I. Milo Shepard (Stanford, US: Stanford University Press, 1988) 1: 25.

⁷ Jack London, *John Barleycorn* (New York: Modern Library, 2001) 39.

⁸ London’s marginalia and precise references express the connections among these articles and “The Apostate,” which he completed on March 29, 1906.

⁹ Jack London, “The Apostate,” *The Social Writings of Jack London*, ed. Philip S. Foner (Secaucus, US: Citadel Press, 1964) 222. All further quotations from this story will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹⁰ Horatio Alger, Jr., *Ragged Dick: or, Street Life in New York with the Boot Blacks* (Boston: Loring, 1868) 9.

potential for advancement as a result of hard work, luck, and the intervention of a wealthy gentleman. London's narrator develops this formulation when he notes:

[Johnny's] earlier years had been full of dreaming. Once he had been in love. It was when he first began guiding the cloth over the hot roller, and it was with the daughter of the superintendent. [...] On the surface of the cloth stream that poured past him, he pictured radiant futures wherein he performed prodigies of toil, invented miraculous machines, won to the mastership of the mills, and in the end took her in his arms and kissed her soberly on the brow. (232)

The process by which the young worker wins the love of the superintendent's daughter evokes the narrative arc of Alger's fiction through the protagonist's mental picture of ascending to the ownership of the mill through his "prodigies of toil." London, however, inverts the Alger archetype as Johnny cannot attain financial security through his exertions. "The Apostate" omits the other components of Alger's formula from Johnny's dream since they find no outlet in his world: chance does not result in positive change in the factory, and benevolence seldom governs relations between labor and capital. London underscores Johnny's plight through the representation of his imagined future on the cloth that winds endlessly through the machine, ironically presenting the central character's toil as a means of realizing prosperity when it confines him to the socio-economic position of his birth.

Within the parameters of the American Dream, "The Apostate" advances a condemnation of the economic system of London's era, indicating that Johnny's fate is a predictable outcome for one of his station. This theme manifests through the protagonist's employment history: at seven, he started at a jute mill, began weaving cloth the following year, and proceeded to a glass plant before returning to the first factory. The circularity of Johnny's experiences reveals his limited options as he cannot move past his initial point for a significant period of time, and every slight progression results in a swift descent because of his substandard living and working conditions. London develops these elements in the description of the youth's daily routine, emphasizing the squalid environment that results from the family's poverty. The narrator conveys the nature of these surroundings when he refers to Johnny's attempts to clean himself and observes, "[t]hat a sink should smell was to him part of the natural order, just as it was part of the natural order that the soap should be grimy with the dishwater and hard to lather" (223). This description would have been particularly jarring to the readership of the *Woman's Home Companion*, a magazine that focused on the domestic concerns of the middle class. Accordingly, London's depiction of these unsanitary conditions emphasizes Johnny's necessary deviation from the conventions of polite society due to his economic position. The narrator accentuates this idea through a description of the child's meager breakfast of cold pork, thin slices of bread, and a "hot and muddy liquid" that he confuses with good coffee, reinforcing the family's impecunious state and inability to obtain sufficient nourishment (224). Further, Johnny's plight originates within an urban milieu: when the boy and his mother leave for the factory, the narrator observes that the "stars had not yet begun to pale in the sky, and the city lay in darkness" (225). This passage expresses a fundamental opposition in "The Apostate" between the natural world and the city, restricting the characters' actions in accordance with the imperatives of capital and preventing an alternate course of development for the protagonist.

Johnny’s opportunities for advancement are further diminished by the nature of his labor, which compromises his health and confines him to his present position in the economic hierarchy. This portrayal seems to originate from an article in London’s files titled “The Modern Slaughter of the Innocents” by Owen R. Lovejoy, the General Secretary of the National Child Labor Committee. London circled the following passage:

The little boy who can sit for ten hours a day on a low stool bent over his work and with lightning fingers tie three hundred dozen glass stoppers into their bottles in the ten hours, is a marvel of mechanical efficiency. But the nervous twitch of the muscles at rest, the sunken chest and feeble lungs, the bent back and drooping shoulders, the sallow face and expressionless eyes foretell the curse which outraged Nature is already writing with his life blood against the race.¹¹

These maladies emerge in “The Apostate” as the chronic illnesses that cost Johnny each of his jobs, and London also incorporates the precise quota for production into the story. These elements ground the narrative in its immediate historical context through the representation of maladies common to the working class during this era. London articulates these consequences when the inspector examines the child and notes that the “boy’s got the rickets – incipient, but he’s got them. If epilepsy doesn’t get him in the end, it will be because tuberculosis gets him first” (227). These diseases stem not from just any inherent infirmity but from the unhealthy conditions of the central character’s labor, the absence of sunlight and the lack of adequate nutrients – issues that leave him with no apparent avenue toward prosperity, let alone allow his survival with a modicum of human decency.

“The Apostate” further highlights the consequences of Johnny’s exertions through the physical effects of his repetitive movements. This point becomes apparent when the protagonist ties weaver’s knots in his sleep, a representation that London gleaned from an article in his files. In “Child Labor Legislation,” the anonymous writer quotes Lovejoy referring to a young worker and noting that “as the precursor of a healthy man he is a failure. He has been reduced to a bundle of quivering nerves and can doubtless tie knots at lightning speed easier than he can sit still.”¹² This material reinforces the relationship between such practices and detrimental results for laborers through the physical stresses on the operative, whose future prospects have been undermined by his position in the factory. London conveys his debt to this source when the narrator states that there “was nothing difficult about the weaver’s knots. He once boasted that he could tie them in his sleep. And for that matter, he sometimes did, toiling centuries long in a single night at tying an endless succession of weaver’s knots” (225). The connections to this work are evident through the final reference and Johnny’s inability to sit still even at rest, which illustrate how the boy’s occupation shapes all aspects of life as he receives no reprieve from his toil. London further develops the implications of “Child Labor Legislation” through Johnny’s aged appearance, with the suggestion that he has given his most productive years to his employers at the expense of attributes that could have facilitated a brighter future.

¹¹ Owen R. Lovejoy, “The Modern Slaughter of the Innocents,” *Men and Women* 3 (October 1905): 4, Jack London Collection, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California, Box 555, JLE 1554.

¹² “Child Labor Legislation: Owen R. Lovejoy’s Address to Factory Inspectors,” n.p., n.d.: 1, Jack London Collection, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California, Box 555, JLE 1523.

The emphasis on Johnny's mechanization further buttresses the social themes of "The Apostate," connecting his fate to the requirements of his labor and the limited progress that such arrangements make possible for the poor. The impetus for this representation also seems to be "Child Labor Legislation," in which London circled the following passage:

The proprietor of a successful glass house recently with pride brought me to a small boy who sat on a low stool tying glass stoppers into small bottles. He sat bent over his work, the bottles held between his knees and the bundle of string at his hip, his body thrown forward and his chest contracted, *his thin arms flying with the swift and accurate motion of a perfect machine, as he hummed in his labor for ten hours a day*. Three knots were made for each and the daily task was 300 dozen bottles.¹³

From this source, London obtained the details of Johnny's occupation performing piecework at the glass plant. The story employs a similar description of his daily tasks, stresses the resulting physical consequences due to the posture he must adopt, and incorporates the precise quota for production. Further, the designation of the unnamed operative as a "*perfect machine*" anticipates London's focus on the shaping role of the protagonist's labor, and the narrator clarifies this idea when he states that Johnny "excelled, because the clay of him had been moulded by the mills into the perfect machine" (234). The reference to the central character as "clay" formed by his milieu reinforces the deterministic basis of the narrative, with its implication that people are capable of a broad range of development and that environmental pressures ultimately dictate individual outcomes.

"The Apostate" offers a powerful illustration of this concept through Johnny's mechanization, which extends the social criticism of the work to register the loss of his humanity due to modern industrial processes. The narrator introduces the boy's occupation at the jute mill by noting that he "worked mechanically" (225). At this stage, the speaker focuses on Johnny with the modifier reflecting the nature of his tasks and introducing their detrimental effects. These concerns gain clear expression through the subsequent references to machines. The narrator observes that from "the perfect worker [Johnny] had evolved into the perfect machine. When his work went wrong, it was with him as with the machine, due to faulty material. It would have been as possible for a perfect nail-die to cut imperfect nails as for him to make a mistake" (226). The similes establish a fundamental connection between the central character and the equipment he operates, denoting that the former has gradually been absorbed into the latter. As a result, the boy exists as an automaton that is defined by his labor, an analogy the narrator conveys through the shift he intones from the child to his mechanized state, while at the same time the comparison of Johnny to the nail-die reinforces that he exists only in relation to the value he produces for the company. The narrator locates this transformation within the economic framework that governs the factory:

[The] superintendent was very proud of [Johnny] and brought visitors to look at him. In ten hours three hundred dozen bottles passed through his hands. This meant he had attained machine-like perfection. All waste movements were eliminated. Every motion of his thin arms, every movement of a muscle in the thin fingers, was swift and accurate. (231)

¹³ "Child Labor Legislation" 1.

The narrator’s emphasis on the young man’s efficiency demonstrates the qualities that make him a model worker: his accuracy and the absence of excess movement enable him to generate higher profits for the ownership, which prompts the superintendent’s approval. This diligence, however, accelerates Johnny’s decline, diminishing his humanity and turning him into another component in the course of production.

Johnny’s dehumanization manifests further through the deterioration of his intellect, which occurs in relation to the increase in his efficiency. For this aspect of the story, London drew on another important source to depict the consequences for individuals employed under similar conditions. In “Turning Children into Dollars,” Juliet Wilbor Tompkins described a young worker who sat

[...] in a closet lighted by a gas jet, with a little stick in his hand, watching a great stream of cloth that poured down from above and passed over a hot roller that ironed its surface, his business being to guide the cloth if it showed a tendency to swerve to the right or to the left from the roller. It was easy work – horribly, wickedly easy. Not a muscle of his body was getting proper development; his mind slept undisturbed as his eyes dully watched the cloth stream.¹⁴

London bracketed this passage, incorporating the first sentence into the description of the central character’s occupation at the mill, while also stressing the weakening of his cognitive faculties due to the absence of any stimulation. The narrator develops these detrimental effects through the contrast between Johnny’s current state and his earlier perspective, noting that the boy was “happy at that job, in spite of the moist heat, for he was still young and in possession of dreams and illusions. And wonderful dreams he dreamed as he watched the steaming cloth streaming endlessly by. But there was no exercise about the work, no call upon his mind, and he dreamed less and less, while his mind grew torpid and drowsy” (231). This lack of intellectual challenge turns the youth into “part of the mechanism,” and London alludes to Tompkins’s article through the reference to Johnny’s brain becoming “torpid and drowsy,” evoking the statement that the young operative’s “mind slept undisturbed.”

“The Apostate” extends this theme through the mention of the loss of the protagonist’s capacity to dream. The narrator observes that the “machinery ran faster than when [Johnny] had first gone to work, and his mind ran slower. He no longer dreamed at all” (231). This alteration points to Johnny’s inability to attain his desires within the confines of his employment, since increases in his productivity have come at the expense of the traits that might have allowed for a different outcome. The narrator underscores this point by stating that the “rest of the time he worked, and his conscious state was machine consciousness. Other than that, his mind was a blank. He had no ideals, and but one illusion: namely, that he drank excellent coffee. He was a work-beast. He had no mental life whatsoever” (234). Through the decay of his capability to think and dream, Johnny has lost what separates humans from lower life forms. However, this regression does not reduce him to the status of an animal, which still exists within nature, but a “work-beast,” an abnormal creature that violates the patterns of the natural world.

The references to food throughout “The Apostate” supply additional indications of Johnny’s deterioration. In the opening scene, the boy states that he does not mind living farther away from the factory since the dollar saved on rent “means more grub” and that “[he]’d sooner

¹⁴ Juliet Wilbor Tompkins, “Turning Children into Dollars,” *Success Magazine* (January 1906): 15, Jack London Collection, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California, Box 555, JLE 1579.

do the walkin' and get the grub" (224). Expressing the role that this desire for sustenance plays in shaping the child's actions, the narrator observes that "two dollars represented the difference between acute starvation and chronic underfeeding" (231). Despite his diligent efforts, Johnny cannot earn enough money to satisfy his physical requirements, apparent through the distinction between two forms of insufficient caloric energy – a situation which alludes to the meager meal that he consumes at the beginning of the story. The narrator accentuates the prominent position that eating occupies in the young worker's consciousness by noting that there "had been several great events in [Johnny's] life. One of these had been when his mother bought some California prunes. Two others had been the two times when she cooked custard" (232). This passage reflects the extent of the protagonist's deprivation, which is so acute that he connects the most noteworthy events in his life to consumption since these are the only instances when he has experienced what amount to luxuries. This context clarifies the thematic significance of the floating island, a French confection consisting of meringue in *crème anglaise*, as a representation of Johnny's decline. When his mother finally makes this treat, one that he had relegated "to the limbo of unattainable ideals" (232), he takes no apparent interest in it as he is engaged in the task of "mechanically eating what was before him" (234). The modifier reiterates that the central character's labor has produced his current state, preventing him from obtaining any enjoyment of life, a void made evident by his disinterest in his dessert. Further, this episode provides the initial manifestation of the illness that causes Johnny's flight and thereby establishes the foundation for his relative transformation at the end of "The Apostate."

London's social criticism extends to the representation of Johnny's domestic life, highlighting how economic pressures can destabilize the natural bonds of affection between individuals, given the boy's estrangement from his family. London develops this point from Johnny's perspective, through his observation of his siblings playing outside, when the narrator comments that the youth lacked "patience with their excessive and amazing juvenility. He did not understand it. His own childhood was too far behind him. He was like an old and irritable man, annoyed by the turbulence of their young spirits that was to him errant silliness" (228). The protagonist's inability to understand his siblings' actions results from the fact that he has not shared comparable experiences since he adopted an adult role when he first went to work at age seven. Further, Johnny's hostility emerges from both the lack of a normal upbringing and the realization that his labor has afforded Will the potential for a brighter future. Clarifying this point through a contrast between the physical appearances of the brothers, the narrator comments:

Will seemed to show the benefit of this giving over and the giving away. He was well-built, fairly rugged, as tall as his elder brother and even heavier. It was as though the lifeblood of the one had been diverted into the other's veins. And in spirits it was the same. Johnny was jaded, worn out, without resilience, while his younger brother seemed bursting and spilling over with exuberance. (229)

This comparison reflects the causative role of each character's environment: the factory has turned Johnny into a sickly automaton whose fate has been sealed by his exertions; Will, on the other hand, has the opportunities afforded by education and good health that will seemingly enable him to attain prosperity. This relationship indicates that although mobility might be possible for some, such advancement comes at the expense of another who produces the conditions that contribute to such successes.

This sense of alienation also governs Johnny’s relationship with his mother, whom many critics have identified as the villain in the story; however, such readings ignore how her acts are prefigured by the same forces that dictate the opportunities available to her eldest child. Joan Hedrick asserts that Johnny’s mother is “the immediate agent of Johnny’s oppression, in that it is she who wakes him up and insists he hurry or else ‘be docked.’”¹⁵ In a related vein, Stephen T. Dhondt contends that the “degenerate condition of the working class is not entirely the result of injustices on the part of the ruling class. Some of the blame must fall on the ignorance of the uneducated, inept people of the proletariat.”¹⁶ While the boy’s mother plays a role in his plight, she is not the agent of his oppression. Instead, she merely reflects the fiscal reality that victimizes both the woman and her offspring, causing her to send Johnny into the factory so that his siblings might experience more positive outcomes. Within these confines, Johnny’s mother attempts to mitigate the severity of her actions by giving the protagonist part of her meager breakfast, and this selfless act underscores a maternal concern for his well-being. Further, the mother’s denial of agency through the declaration that “it wasn’t my fault. I do the best I can” reveals the limitations imposed by her class position, lack of education, and the absence of the children’s father, elements that have required her to sacrifice Johnny’s best interests for the prospects of his siblings (230). The relationship between the protagonist and his mother further informs London’s indictment of an economic system that often necessitates greater hardships for some individuals so that others may eventually prosper.

These extreme consequences suggest more than an exposé of child labor in the United States; instead, “The Apostate” advances a critique of the fiscal context that conditions such abuses. Even though Federal legislation prohibiting such employment was not upheld until the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938, many states had imposed restrictions on underage employees, beginning with Massachusetts in 1836.¹⁷ London indicates that the story is set in one of these areas through the episode with the one-legged boy since the superintendent refers to the passage of a measure to keep children out of the factories, and the presence of the inspector who discharges Johnny’s colleague signifies that this regulation is being enforced. This incident has its origins in Tompkins’s article, from which London incorporated both the one-legged boy’s statement of “please, inspector, two babies died on us, and we’re awful poor,” adding only the formal designation “Mr.,” and the fact that the inspector has removed the child from three factories in the past year.¹⁸ Tompkins, reflecting on the conditions that forced this young man to get a job, writes that the “boy, with the helpless loyalty of downtrodden childhood, is paying the rent and has been paying it for two years; all he asks is to go on paying it until the rest of him follows his leg into uncomplaining dust. That is all his parents ask of him.”¹⁹ London’s borrowings from this source contextualize the plight of people like Johnny in the early twentieth

¹⁵ Joan Hedrick, *Solitary Comrade: Jack London and His Work* (Chapel Hill, US: University of North Carolina Press, 1982) 171.

¹⁶ Dhondt 30.

¹⁷ Prior to the Fair Labor Standards Act, the Supreme Court blocked two attempts to implement Federal laws regarding child labor: the Keating-Owen Act of 1916 and the Pomerene Amendment to the Revenue Bill of 1919. The Executive Committee of Southern Cotton Manufacturers mounted a legal challenge to the first measure, which banned commodities produced by youths under the age of fourteen from interstate commerce, and the Supreme Court ruled in *Hammer v. Dagenhart* that Congress did not have the authority to regulate articles of trade based on the conditions of their production (Hugh D. Hindman, *Child Labor: An American History* [Armonk, US: M. E. Sharpe, 2002] 68-69). In *Drexel Furniture v. J. W. Bailey*, the Supreme Court struck down the second measure, which imposed an excise tax on goods made by children, on constitutional grounds (Hindman 72-73).

¹⁸ Tompkins 17.

¹⁹ Tompkins 17.

century, denoting that their labor stems from the inadequate options for survival available to many families during this period. As such, the experiences of the young workers in “The Apostate” convey a criticism of reformist measures, expressing that such legislative actions are ineffective because they fail to address the financial need that compels parents to end their children’s education, to send them into the workforce so early in life, and to limit their prospects.

The conclusion of “The Apostate” reinforces the need for systemic change by heightening the power of Johnny’s milieu yet also signifying that a new environment could engender a different outcome for the protagonist. This representation correlates with the deterministic theories that London advanced in a letter to George Wharton James. Discussing *White Fang*, London wrote:

[Every] atom of life is plastic. The finest specimens now in existence were once all pulpy infants capable of being moulded this way or that. Let the pressure be one way and we have atavism – the reversion to the wild; the other domestication, civilization. I have always been impressed with the awful plasticity of life and I feel that I can never lay enough stress upon the marvelous power and influence of environment.²⁰

The reference to creatures being molded by their surroundings reflects Johnny’s time in the factory, which demonstrates “the marvelous power and influence of environment.” Further, this emphasis on “the awful plasticity of life” conveys the nature of London’s social criticism. By endowing his characters with a range of potentialities and connecting the emergence of certain elements to environmental causes, London indicates that an alteration of the conditions responsible for such effects will allow other aspects of the individual to emerge.

This theme manifests in “The Apostate” through Johnny’s removal from the factory as the shift from the industrial arena to the natural world allows dormant aspects of his character to reassert themselves. London establishes this point in the early stages of the story when the boy’s engagement with the outdoors is regulated by the temporal scheme of his urban workplace. The narrator observes that when Johnny “entered the factory gate the whistle blew again. He glanced at the east. Across a ragged sky-line of housetops a pale light was beginning to creep. This much he saw of the day as he turned his back upon it and joined his work-gang” (225). Man-made structures, evident through the whistle that standardizes employment, have displaced the natural cycle of life, and this development expresses Johnny’s estrangement from normal patterns of existence, which he can only recapture outside the mill. The additional references to the natural world as a sustaining, hospitable environment indicate the potential for awakening the other elements of Johnny’s character. The narrator observes that while the protagonist labored, “the sun had made a golden ladder of the sky, flooded the world with its gracious warmth, and dropped down and disappeared in the west behind a ragged sky-line of housetops” (228). London’s language offers a departure from the stark prose of the work, a rhetorical move that distinguishes this passage from the rest of the narrative and further establishes the significance of what the youth lacks. Further, the “golden ladder” and “gracious warmth” signify the possibilities for change outside the factory and the economic relations it embodies.

Johnny’s convalescence reinforces this theme by contrasting his current state with his condition earlier in the narrative, which provides a clear illustration of the youth’s transformation. The narrator notes that as the protagonist recuperated,

²⁰ Quoted in Charmian London, *The Book of Jack London* (New York: Century, 1921) 2: 49-50.

[...] he was greatly absorbed in the one tree that grew across the street. He studied it for hours at a time and was unusually interested when the wind swayed its branches and fluttered its leaves. Throughout the week he seemed lost in a great communion with himself. On Sunday, sitting on the stoop, he laughed aloud, several times, to the perturbation of his mother, who had not heard him laugh in years. (236)

This examination of the tree evokes the earlier episode when he sat on the front stoop and “did no thinking. He was just resting. So far as his mind was concerned, it was asleep” (229). The outdoors, once unnoticed by the young man, supply the framework for his deeper awareness of the constraints that have governed his existence, and the “communion with himself” signifies the reemergence of the individuality that industrial processes had displaced. Johnny’s laughter provides another important counterpoint to the earlier scene as his mirth differs from his former taciturn demeanor and his violent response to the exuberance of his siblings. “The Apostate” further expresses Johnny’s transformation when he calculates the number of movements that he made during his employment. These contemplations allow him to observe the problematic nature of the labor that has shaped his life, conditioning his flight from his present milieu. This alteration reflects his capacity for growth when removed from the framework that has previously dictated both his perspective and his actions.

Johnny’s escape from the factory seems to express a possibility for his eventual progress, yet the ending of the story indicates that his transformation may have occurred too late to make any difference, a situation which heightens the tragedy of the work. The narrator conveys the limited nature of Johnny’s development through the uncertainty of his future: “The Apostate” concludes with him smiling as he leaves his immediate environment aboard a freight train without any discussion of his fate. The protagonist has neither a destination in mind nor any clear objectives to shape his actions, and his lack of skills that would qualify him for a different occupation suggests that his future will not vary dramatically from his past. The context preceding his departure further diminishes his prospects. The narrator observes:

[The] houses and factories thinned out and the open spaces increased as [Johnny] approached the country. At last the city was behind him, and he was walking down a leafy lane beside the railroad track. He did not walk like a man. He did not look like a man. He was a travesty of the human. It was a twisted and stunted and nameless piece of life that shambled like a sickly ape, arms loose-hanging, stoop-shouldered, narrow-chested, grotesque and terrible. (238-39)

The references to the factory and city reiterate the forces that have engendered Johnny’s state, which remains impervious to by the restorative power of nature. Despite Johnny’s attempts to alter the conditions of his existence, he has been marked by his labor to the extent that it has undermined his basic humanity, evident through London’s use of animal imagery coupled with the shift in sentence subjects. This description highlights the wasted life of one who has seen his potential blunted by seemingly insuperable forces that have restricted his opportunities regardless of where he travels. Further, the reduction of Johnny to “a travesty of the human” provides a powerful indictment of the economic system of London’s era and indicates the necessity for social change in order to minimize such outcomes.

The periodical accounts of child labor that London incorporated into “The Apostate” provide an effective foundation for the author to represent the plight of the poor and the human consequences of economic exploitation. While the story is firmly rooted within conditions prevalent during the early twentieth century, the narrative has a lasting appeal because it involves a concept central to the American experience – the belief that individuals can shape their material circumstances – and illustrates the discrepancy between this ideal and its application to life in the United States. In representing how unbridled capitalism has corrupted the American Dream, “The Apostate” serves the important functions of contextualizing the experience of the working class and potentially engendering the critical reflection necessary to address the socio-economic forces that constrain the opportunities available to the general population.