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When Liberty Fails: Oligarchy and the Suppression of Freedom in Jack London's *The Iron Heel*

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Abstract

This thesis examines how American Author Jack London's dystopian novel *The Iron Heel* (1908) depicts freedom as limited and unattainable under the conditions of concentrated economic power from an oligarchy. While previous discourse on *The Iron Heel* has focused on the intentions behind the creation of the novel, seeing it as either a work of protest, propaganda, or a way to endorse a Marxist ideology, this essay instead analyses the novel's thematic discourse. Furthermore, this essay draws on English philosopher John Stuart Mill's theory of liberty and how to protect it, as presented in his essay *On Liberty* (1859), where he concludes that freedom of expression, freedom of pursuit, and freedom of association must be upheld for true individual liberty to be achieved. This essay thus uses the framework of Mill, along with the structure of oligarchy, to investigate how the oligarchy in *The Iron Heel* makes individual freedom impossible in the novel. Additionally, although formal rights appear to exist within the novel's society, the analysis demonstrates that lived freedom is significantly restricted, creating an illusion of freedom for all. To accomplish this, an analysis has been made of all Mill's three liberties and their correlation to the freedom presented in *The Iron Heel*.

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1. Introduction

Freedom has long been regarded as central in United States cultural and political life, serving as a foundational principle of the American ideal, as famously proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence, which asserts the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (Declaration of Independence). Historian Kenneth E. Morris writes that freedom, one of the core values of the United States, is an adaptable concept that is open to subjective interpretation, simply because “America is the ‘land of the free’” (Morris 7).

The idea of freedom as a lived reality has, however, been significantly challenged in United States literature, such as John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and *The Jungle* (1906) by Upton Sinclair, where the writers highlight the gap between the promise of freedom and the realities of economic inequality and social power. While these novels focus on the constraints that limit certain characters in the plot, American author Jack London’s *The Iron Heel* (1908) provides a different approach. By incorporating a dystopian perspective, he demonstrates how a concentrated oligarchic government can affect society and its principles, such as freedom. In *The Iron Heel*, the socialist revolutionist Ernest Everhard is seen battling the oligarchal government “the Iron Heel” together with his wife Avis, while partaking in an ideological war with capitalists obtaining as much power as possible in society. The novel almost immediately establishes the significance of liberty for the reader when, in the first chapter, Avis introduces the character of Ernest, stating, “I think of what has been and is no more - my Eagle, beating with tireless wings in the void, soaring toward what was ever his sun, the flaming ideal of human freedom” (London 10). London therefore not only demonstrates how far the characters are willing to go to achieve their freedom, but also illustrates through the metaphor of the national bird how liberty is linked to United States values.

The Iron Heel is shaped by broader nineteenth-century political and philosophical ideas, a period during which English philosopher John Stuart Mill also published his essay *On Liberty* (1859). The essay became well-known for its discussion on liberty and freedom, especially by using a utilitarian approach to the concept (Baum 494). Mill argues in his work that liberty is the condition in which individuals are sovereign over their own body and mind, and therefore are free to act and think as they choose, and associate themselves with any community without external interference, provided that the individual does not cause harm to others (Mill 21, 22, 26) Mill foremost uses the concepts of three liberties to determine how complete the freedom of an individual is: freedom of expression, freedom of pursuit and freedom of association (27).

He additionally argues that “no society in which these liberties are not, on the whole, respected, is free” (27). Moreover, Mill recognizes not only constraints on freedom in a legal manner but also obstacles that are “restricted beyond the reach of the law” (Baum 499), thereby introducing the dualistic idea of freedom as both a lived reality and an imagined concept. The reason for using Mill when discussing *The Iron Heel* is that Mill not only focuses on individual liberty under social pressure but also because his three liberties give this essay a clear analytical structure, making it practical, especially since Liberty is such an adaptable concept. London also mentions Mill and *On Liberty* in the novel, revealing how he knew about Mill’s philosophy (London 53, 110).

By using Mill’s definition of liberty to analyze how Jack London uses *The Iron Heel* to reveal the tensions of suppression between the oligarchy and middle- and lower-class United States citizens, this essay offers a new perspective on freedom in the novel as structurally impossible under concentrated power. While there exist connections between Mill and London, critics have not presented a reading that involves them both in a discussion, which is something this essay does in a new way. Scholars such as Nathaniel Teich have instead chosen to focus on the Marxist approach, discussing how the novel uses Marxist literary criticism to “[synthesize] not only themes and formal structures but also the writer’s life in the actual world and the reader’s responses” (Teich 99). Thomas Ray Garcia demonstrates another perspective of *The Iron Heel*, arguing that London writes the novel as a piece of political influence, “[attempting] to preserve London’s socialist propaganda” (Garcia 209). The idea of *The Iron Heel* as a part of protest fiction is thus a common interpretation. As noted by Cecilia Tichi, London explicitly announced his determination to bring about social change in a speech stating that the working class is in a war with capitalists, trying to retain their democratic power (Tichi 39). However, rather than reading the novel as a work of revolution, this essay expands on the war between the working class and capitalists by examining how that very work of revolution in *The Iron Heel* is systematically suppressed through the oligarchy, and how their power suppresses the conditions necessary for true freedom.

The synopsis of *The Iron Heel* focuses primarily on how the oligarchy possesses control over the United States government and how their power position creates further economic disparities between classes. Political scientist Jeffery A. Winters argues that concentrated wealth creates significant political power imbalances, meaning that liberty and political equality can only exist when there is equality of opportunity. (Winters 5). An oligarchy, as he additionally details, is thus a form of government where power is dominated by a small minority (1). This suggests that freedom is fundamentally tied to economic and political

structures, as London demonstrates in *The Iron Heel* through his depiction of how concentrated power and economic markets limit liberty and redefine who can experience freedom. A more detailed analysis of the oligarchy's role in suppressing freedom in the novel will be developed later.

This paper aims to answer the question of how *The Iron Heel* depicts freedom as limited under the conditions of concentrated economic power. By examining the three liberties of Mill, being freedom of expression, freedom of pursuit, and freedom of association, the essay will discuss how freedom becomes a mere chimera for the people of the United States in the hands of the Iron Heel oligarchy. This essay argues that Jack London's *The Iron Heel* portrays freedom under oligarchic rule as structurally impossible, as the oligarchy's concentration of economic power methodically weakens John Stuart Mill's three liberties, additionally revealing a fundamental contradiction and illusion between formal liberty and lived freedom. The paper will first give an overview of the novel, following a background on the history of the Gilded Age, the era in the nineteenth century that influenced *The Iron Heel*. While the novel is set after this period, the Gilded Age therefore provides the economic and political context necessary to understand *The Iron Heel* fully. Thereafter, a theoretical framework of Mill's concept of freedom will be provided, along with a definition of an oligarchy. This essay will analyze *The Iron Heel* through the framework of Mill's three liberties to examine how the oligarchy projects its power onto society and the methods it uses to suppress the people of the United States, along with arguing that there is an illusion that freedom exists, while lived freedom indeed does not.

2. Background

The Iron Heel is a dystopian novel written by American author Jack London, published in 1908, that takes place during a fictional future period from 1912 to 1932. The novel recounts the brutally repressive capitalist society of the Oligarchs (the Iron Heel) and the struggle of socialists to overthrow it, showing a fictional future of a world controlled by capitalism and fascism, foreseeing aspects of the 20th century, such as the rise of the fascist states of Germany and Italy in the 1930s (London viii).

The novel has a framed narrative structure, meaning that there are two stories accounted for, acting as a "story within a story". The first narrative introduces the historian Anthony Meredith, who includes thoughts and facts in the form of footnotes in a manuscript written by

Avis Everhard, the narrator of the secondary narrative (Garcia 201). In contrast to the world of Avis Everhard, Anthony Meredith lives in a socialist society of the far future in the 27th century, using the manuscript as a historical document to report on the capitalist society that was present during the 1900s. While the narrative of Meredith acts more as facts or key points throughout the novel, that of Avis Everhard is a standard first-person narrative. Avis Everhard, along with her husband Ernest Everhard, are two socialist revolutionary who, together attempt to overthrow the oligarchy who call themselves “the Iron Heel”. Throughout the novel, the couple meets with characters who initially appear to benefit from the capitalistic society, but later, with the help of the Everhards, come to recognize that they are not. This, in turn, highlights how the novel is presented through the idea that the American dream is not attainable by everyone, even high-income earners. The Everhards use their connections to gather a group of revolutionaries who then are expected to help take down the serving antagonists of the novel, The Iron Heel. An oligarchy is a government that is ruled by a few, hence being the wealthy group of industrial capitalists calling themselves “the Iron Heel”.

The oligarchy is an undemocratic group, maintaining power through armies and violent suppression of socialist movements and labor unions, therefore having strict control over the media and public opinion. As the novel progresses, the reader learns how the suppression tactics of the Iron Heel eventually lead to the demise of the middle class, giving immense concentrated power to the upper-class industrial owners, since they are the ones left with power. *The Iron Heel* therefore grapples with themes such as class struggles, oppression, authoritarianism, and resistance, but most importantly, the novel asks the question of what happens to a society when economic inequality and corporate power go unchecked. This question also reflects the social and economic conditions of the Gilded Age, where similar concerns about inequality and concentrated power were already present.

2.1 Economic and Political Context

To understand the conditions that portray the concentration of wealth and freedom in *The Iron Heel*, it is necessary to look at the economic and political environment of the United States during the late nineteenth century, a period when there was globalization and cultural activity, but also a great deal of political corruption and capitalism (Taube 1). Even though Jack London published *The Iron Heel* in 1908, the plot is heavily influenced by the economic and social conditions that were present during the late nineteenth century. Susan Shillinglaw additionally mentions that at the beginning of the 20th century, writers such as Jack London called attention

to the economic growth and the new activity of the industrial boom, focusing on a “moment when [...] dreams and failures violently collided” (157). This era (1865-1900) was later named “the Gilded Age,” a period of “gross materialism and blatant political corruption in U.S history,” creating rich corporations such as those by John D. Rockefeller and J.P Morgan that eventually evolved into monopolies (Encyclopedia Britannica). The emergence of this era began as a contrast to the destruction caused by the Civil War, reconstructing the United States economy by creating infrastructure such as railways, promoting immigration, and establishing corporations (Taube 1). While the economic growth helped the United States enter the global market and contributed to the rise of a consumer society, it also encouraged a culture of materialism (1). As wealth became increasingly concentrated among a small elite, inequality between social classes grew larger, partly due to rising unemployment among the lower and middle classes in the 1890s (1). Moreover, this is the premise of London’s novel, which describes the rise of the oligarchic group, the Iron Heel.

As the industrialization in the United States accelerated, so did the production, along with the poor working environments, to prioritize the business’s revenue (McCrossen 2). Discussions around wage labor eventually created the concept of earning a wage for certain working hours, and the desire to change the wages was profound, since many found no differences between laborers and slaves, giving them the title of “modern slaves”, or the concept “wage slavery” (24). The mirroring of the African American slaves who were freed just seven years earlier from the Emancipation Proclamation was heavily emphasized, which prompted lower-class United States citizens to become aware of the impacts social and wealth inequalities had on their freedom (24). While many workers accepted the brutality of the industry, others thought of this as an offense to their freedom and independence and sought to voice their discontent by partaking in labor strikes (McCrossen 142). Two of the most well-known strikes in the United States during the late 19th century were the Great Railroad strike (1877) and the Homestead strike (1892); two strikes where workers went against the capitalist owners of the industrial corporations (136). *The Iron Heel* reflects the tensions between laborers and industrial capitalists by depicting workers as not being “free agents”, suggesting that economic dependence limits genuine freedom and reinforcing the nineteenth-century idea of “wage slavery”.

Similarly, just as enslaved people were not alone in opposing slavery, resistance to poor working conditions was not limited to low-income workers, but was also supported by others, including many writers (Cadle 69). One of those was Upton Sinclair, who wrote *The Jungle* (1906), a novel about an immigrant worker battling with the harsh working conditions of the

Chicago meatpacking industry. Sinclair publicly noted that the reasoning behind writing *The Jungle* was to inform the public about the exploitive working conditions of the industrial factories, drawing inspiration from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) that generated exposure for the enslaved people (69). While the novel was received by many United States citizens as a great piece of work, its initial aim to improve the lives of industrial workers was overshadowed by the meatpacking aspect of the novel, contributing to federal meat inspection and the regulation of the meat supply (72). Despite this, Sinclair's novel left an impression on Jack London. Tichi reveals in a biography of London that London "saw an advantage in Upton Sinclair's best-selling [novel], (90), recognizing how *The Jungle* had attracted public attention to conditions in the meat packing industry and hoping that *The Iron Heel* would achieve a similar impact (90).

Therefore, *The Iron Heel* similarly engages with tensions surrounding capital and labor, critiquing the power of the industrial elites and the conditions faced by workers, ultimately leaving reviews such as one from the Indianapolis news that wrote that the novel contains "a most impressive warning" (90). London additionally engages with how the concentration of wealth enables the industrial elite to exert its power over both economic structures and labor unions, something that the concept of liberty for the society of the novel is being challenged by at the same time.

2.2 Liberty and Freedom

To be able to analyze how the conditions of the concentrated wealth from the oligarchy affect labor workers and society in *The Iron Heel*, it is necessary to clarify what liberty and freedom as concepts mean, especially from the philosophical perspective of John Stuart Mill, since it is from his perception of individual liberty that my analysis of the novel departs.

Liberty can be described as a central concept in political philosophy with a broad range of applications but carries the modern meaning of "the state or condition of being free" ("Liberty"). However, this definition does not account for the broader conditions that should also be considered when discussing such a subject (495). Mill's theory on the three types of liberties and how to protect them directly adheres to an expanded understanding of the concept of liberty, in that "[n]o society in which these liberties are not, on the whole, respected, is free, whatever may be its form of government" (Mill 27). The first liberty contains the freedom of thought and speech, that one must be free to express their opinions, whether in a scientific sense or a theological sense (26). Thereafter, Mill discusses the second liberty, which is the freedom to pursue one's life as they wish, having freedom of choice without anyone's decisions harming

the individual's freedom (26). He later expanded on this thought in his book *Principles of Political Economy* by stating that inequalities of property, opportunities, and economic power in capitalist societies hinder the freedom of choice for the individual (Baum 501). He focuses especially on labor workers, highlighting how unequal materials and opportunities act as obstacles to freedom (501). The final liberty that Mill discusses is the liberty of association, meaning that an individual should be able to freely unite with others collectively, if it does not intend harm to anyone (Mill 27). The "harm principle" is thus very prominent in all these liberties, carrying the intent that freedom is for oneself, with the intent that it does not deprive others of their freedom (27). These three liberties are ideal for analyzing the freedom that exists in *The Iron Heel*, and to investigate how the social structure of the society in the novel weakens the individual right to sovereignty.

In this essay, the terms "liberty" and "freedom" are used in a closely related way, reflecting Mill's interchangeable use of them in *On Liberty*. However, he often uses "freedom" in a broader sense when discussing, for example, freedom of thought and speech; and while "liberty" has the same definition, it is more commonly used as the central term in his work. In contemporary discourse, however, there is a slight distinction between the terms, with more technicalities put on "liberty", referring to a protection from legal restrictions or social cohesion, while "freedom" refers to the personal choices of acts, such as speech or thought ("Liberty", "Freedom"). Since this thesis will be based on the definitions and philosophical framework presented by John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty*, the terms "liberty" and "freedom" will be used interchangeably.

This essay applies John Stuart Mill's theory of liberty to analyze how freedom is represented in *The Iron Heel*. The essay focuses on how the oligarchy restricts freedom through Mill's three liberties: freedom of thought and speech, freedom to pursue one's own life, and freedom of association. His discussion of lived freedom and formal liberty also acknowledges that while the oligarchy suppresses some freedom, some is still viable if compliance with the oligarchy is made. Therefore, Mill will serve as a basis for my examination of how the concentration of economic power restricts formal rights and the ability of individuals to act freely in London's novel.

2.3 Oligarchy

As mentioned above, an oligarchy is a form of government in which the economy and power are dominated by a small minority, with wealth as the formal motive for its existence (Winters 1). Jeffrey A. Winters argues that, unlike elites who gain power from status and influence,

oligarchies are rooted in material wealth, which directly shapes politics through economic influence (8). Another difference between the elite and an oligarchy is how the former can be challenged through democracy and change, while the latter is highly resistant to this (8). This distinction is important in *The Iron Heel*, since the discussions of wealth distribution and political control in the novel also regard how rich individuals are being undermined by the oligarchy in the novel. Returning to the concept of democracy and oligarchies with their opposing definitions of “dispersed formal political power” and “concentrated material power,” shows that their natures are conflicting (11). Yet Winter presents a compatibility: “democracy and an oligarchy can coexist indefinitely as long as the unpropertied lower classes do not use their expanded political participation to encroach upon the material power and prerogatives of the wealthiest.” (11). The collective actions of labor unions in the novel are therefore an instant threat to the oligarchy, something that will be analysed further.

Concentrated wealth to a small minority creates significant power advantages in political aspects, inevitably meaning that liberty and political equality can only exist when supported by equal conditions, such as economy, healthcare, or education. Winter states that the more unequal the distribution of these conditions is, the more exaggerated the power becomes, as well as the gap of inequality between the individuals carrying it (5). This framework can be used to analyse the relationship between John Stuart Mill’s three liberties and the structure of oligarchies. Together, these perspectives provide a framework for analysing how concentrated economic wealth and power in the form of an oligarchy influence liberty in *The Iron Heel*. It should be noted that while Winters discusses the concept of an oligarchy through a twenty-first-century perspective, his discussions can be applied to the nineteenth-century oligarchy, since they entail the same definition.

3. Analysis

3.1 Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression is one of the central liberties in Mill’s *On Liberty* that are challenged in *The Iron Heel*. Mill acknowledges that freedom of expression is essential for individual liberty. *The Iron Heel* addresses the centralisation of this freedom by showing how the oligarchy restricts it and suppresses society, particularly through control of the press and speech. While formal rights of expression seem to exist, the novel presents how those with economic power

fundamentally decide who this freedom belongs to, inherently suppressing the voices of those who are not in accordance with the oligarchy's principles.

Freedom of speech, thought, and feeling is the "inward domain of consciousness," as Mill calls it. This is the first liberty, which describes the consciousness that exists within our minds, thus presenting liberty of thought and feeling (26). He acknowledges that even though liberty of expressing and publishing opinions may seem to belong in a different category, they fall under the same principle, since they also require the "inward domain of consciousness", making them a part of the first liberty (26). For the sake of clarity, this essay employs the term "freedom of expression" to describe Mill's first liberty. It should be noted, however, that this liberty includes freedom of speech, thought, press, religion, and feeling.

There are many scenes in the novel that demonstrate different tactics used by the oligarchy to subdue the characters' freedom of expression, one being the restriction of the press in the chapter "The Vortex". The father of Avis, Dr Cunningham, is subject to this restriction of freedom after publicly stating socialist opinions. This leads to him being discharged from his occupation at a university and having his published book, *Economics and Education*, suppressed by publishing companies (London 120-122). The reason for the suppression is not explicitly stated in the chapter, but it is heavily implied that it is the secret objective of the Iron Heel to denounce all literature and communications that oppose their ideology. Dr Cunningham believes that his book "touched a sore spot on capitalism." (121) and tries to contact the publishing company but receives the response that "the plates had been accidentally injured." (121), highlighting not only that the oligarchy is cultivated from capitalism, but also revealing their hidden intentions behind the suppression of the press. The use of the word "capitalism" instead of "the oligarchy" suggests that capitalism is presented as the fundamental ideology suppressing individual freedom, with the oligarchy emerging as a structure cultivated from its power.

The hidden objective of the Iron Heel oligarchy to quietly use suppression tactics on society is a way to display power and challenge the freedom of individuals further. Jeffrey A. Winters argues in *Oligarchy* that oligarchies employ different power resources to preserve their presence, one being through mobilization power, which includes the ability to engage with supporters and sway others to their beliefs (15). Oligarchies seek to contain their power either to use it as a tool for their own mobilization or to prevent individuals from holding it independently, since as Winter states, "writers, media figures, commentators, scholars, celebrities, and agitators can also sway significant numbers of people." (16). Acknowledging this, one can understand why the Iron Heel wishes to create its suppression in secret: "This

suppression was performed secretly, so secretly that at first we could not comprehend.” (London 121). They do not want the people to be able to mobilize and retain power. London presents not only a scenario where a scholar is suppressed, but also where books are withdrawn from the public because of their contents, which in the case of the professor’s book, concern thoughts on socialism.

London presents another interesting perspective on the hidden ways that the oligarchy suppresses freedom of expression related to education, by showing that perceived freedom differs from lived freedom. Dr Cunningham grapples with the thought of his book being suppressed and asks himself: “What better evidence could be advanced to prove that education was dominated by the capitalist class?” (London 120). This question, along with Dr Cunningham’s dismissal from the university, reveals the systematic control created by the oligarchy. Because of the existence of universities in the novel, an individual can get an education and is therefore free to think and speak, on the condition that the ideas do not threaten those in power, which makes independent thought contingent upon ideological conformity. Dr Cunningham does in this case threaten those in power with his book, which consequently limits his freedom of expression.

The formal right to get an education is not written explicitly in the chapter “The Vortex”, but it can be understood after reading the chapter “Last Days”, where the Iron Heel serves a bigger part in exerting their power on society. Being set a few years later after “The Vortex”, Avis says that “public schools deteriorated, and education slowly ceased to be compulsory” (166), implying that by the time of “The Vortex”, education was attainable for all. Therefore, the freedom of education exists, while the lived reality simultaneously is that freedom of expression is restricted by a hidden agenda of the oligarchy, making it difficult for individuals to recognise the discrepancy between their formal rights and lived reality, and therefore to act upon it. Mill argues that two social groups limit freedom: public authorities (governments) and society (people and social groups) (13). While London presents a society in which access to university remains formally unrestricted, freedom is nevertheless suppressed by societal forces such as the group the Iron Heel. Drawing on Mill’s theory of liberty, this suggests that social pressures can be “more formidable than many kinds of political oppression” (13), meaning that informal power structures may restrict freedom more than formal laws.

The chapter “The Philomaths” additionally illustrates a situation where freedom of expression is confronted by society, but this time through speech, reflecting Mill’s argument that liberty can be weakened in the absence of legal restriction. Ernest and Avis are invited by the upper class to visit a club called “the Philomath Club,” where Ernest is made aware that the

group setting is intended to humiliate him. “They’ve invited me to tear me into pieces” (London 58). The club “[is] the most select on the Pacific Coast” (57) and invites scholars from around the world to lecture on their discoveries, while at the same time having a policy “to permit none of its discussions to get into the papers” (57). This unveils the power of the club and how it can invite anyone while being able to keep it a secret from the public. Ernest presents a speech on socialism and thus directly attacks the upper class, consequently receiving a strong reaction of hostility from the members. After Ernest begins his speech, it is described that “the women shrank, and fear was in their faces. [...] A low, throaty rumble arose, lingered on the air a moment, and ceased.” (65). The men are also shocked and hysterical, one crying out, “Fallacy upon fallacy! [...] Never in all my life have I heard so many fallacies uttered in one short hour. [...] It has been truly said that a little learning is a dangerous thing, and you have exemplified it to-night with your madcap theories.” (67). While nothing in Ernest’s speech is formally illegal, he is met with social pressure from the upper class to conform. It is clear from their reactions that he is not like the other guests they have previously invited, and that their agenda to humiliate him fell through.

Ernest is not formally silenced, yet the dismissive and ridicule responses of the capitalists suggest that freedom of expression, though legally intact, is constrained by social and economic power. Therefore, corroborating Mill’s argument that freedom can be limited without laws, the pressure from society can challenge freedom more than that of formal laws (Mill 13). Freedom of expression is therefore unattainable under the oligarchic rule of the Iron Heel, since they constrain what the people of the United States can express. By using Mill’s framework and examining how the oligarchy suppresses freedom of the press, speech, and thought, it becomes clear that full individual freedom cannot be achieved in *The Iron Heel*, since Mill argues that these liberties are all necessary for true individual freedom to exist.

3.2 Freedom to Pursue One’s Life

Freedom of pursuit is the second liberty that Mill argues must be fulfilled for individual freedom to exist, something that the oligarchy challenges in *The Iron Heel* by using methods that indirectly make it more difficult for an individual to freely choose their life path. While freedom of expression is a way for the cultivation of the intellectual side of a human, the right to self-govern the act upon those expressions is just as vital (Mill 100). Mill argues that liberty of this pursuit is important; however, it must be limited since “Acts, of whatever kind which, without justifiable cause, do harm to others” (101), meaning that an individual cannot pursue their life and have the right to choose if it harms another individual’s freedom.

This is a significant point in analysing *The Iron Heel*, as the ruling oligarchy legally asserts the same right to liberty as the lower classes, but the lower classes are undermined socially. Martin Bronfenbrenner expands on this antimony between liberties by arguing that two individuals' liberties might conflict, since both have rights to exert their respective freedoms (159). He uses slavery as an example, stating, "If B's freedom to kill or enslave A be recognized as freedom equally with A's freedom to live and avoid slavery, does it follow that the entire idea of freedom should be discarded?" (159). If applying Bronfenbrenner's model to *The Iron Heel*, one can instead ask, "If the Iron Heel's freedom to suppress the people of the United States can be recognized as freedom equally with the United States citizens freedom to live and avoid this suppression, whose freedom should be granted?" Therefore, when applying the thoughts of Mill, one can argue that the freedom of the oligarchy presents a great deal of harm to the remaining individuals, enabling Mill's so-called "harm principle", mentioned above. To reiterate, the harm principle holds that an individual has the right to assert his freedom if he does not harm another person's individual freedom at the same time (Mill 27). Considering this, the oligarchy uses its power not only to suppress expression but also to restrict individual pursuits, something London demonstrates by showing the consequences faced when those in power do not conform to its expectations. Therefore, if following Mill's harm principle, the oligarchy does not have the right to assert its freedom to suppress the people of the United States, similarly to how person B in Bronfenbrenner's model is not free to enslave person A.

One character's freedom of pursuit that is challenged by the Iron Heel is that of Bishop Morehouse. He is a religious figure who initially possesses considerable political influence, being described as "Christ-like in appearance and goodness, and a scholar as well" (London 12). Over the course of the novel, however, his power is stripped away by the oligarchy, and his freedom is suppressed. During the dinner in the chapter "My Eagle", Bishop Morehouse and other upper-class men are confronted by Ernest about capitalism, where he argues that "[the upper class] have nothing in common with the working class." (22). When Bishop Morehouse questions Ernest's arguments, Ernest responds by taking him to a slum, thereby confronting him with the realities of the United States society. The bishop realises that "[his] eyes seemed to be opened", allowing him to see "[...] things as they really [were]." (83). This also shows a direct difference between Ernest and the Iron Heel's method of changing the views of individuals. Ernest is written by London as a model figure who educates and allows individuals to think freely, while the oligarchy forces opinions on people.

In the chapter "The Bishop's Vision", the bishop is seen delivering a speech to the public about the horrors he has encountered in the slum. He describes that he "saw [his] duty sun-clear, as Saul saw his on the way to Damascus." (83), emphasizing his religious background, and wanting to act on injustice like Jesus. The bishop encourages the public to donate money and be more Christ-like; however, he is being met by confrontation, eventually leading to him being led off the platform. Ernest's response to the confrontation is seen in his explanation to Avis that "Not a word that he uttered will see print. [...] To-morrow's papers will merely mention that the bishop is in poor health" (86). Moreover, in the chapter "The Bishop", it is revealed that after the bishop tried to sell all his belongings to the poor, he was sent by the Iron Heel to a private sanitarium for his "mental disease". Ernest recalls how he was "terribly impressed by the tragedy of a sane, normal, saintly man being crushed by the brutal will of society." (137). Bishop Morehouse's choice to help the poor and follow in Christ's footsteps, however his freedom of pursuit is suppressed by the oligarchy. Christ preached that the rich should donate to the poor, and when a wealthy man like the bishop does just that, he is punished, implying that even Christ's wishes are being tormented by the Iron Heel.

Not only is the oligarchy suppressing the bishop's freedom of pursuit, but also his freedom of expression, as he is led off the stage during his speech, and as they refuse to acknowledge his words in the press. London observes this contradiction by stating, "A rich man to-day who gives all he has to the poor is crazy. There is no discussion. Society has spoken." (146), thus strengthening the argument that the oligarchy believes capital is of greater importance than altruism, even if it comes from Jesus, who is seen as a predominantly altruistic person. London thus constructs a comparison between capitalism and altruism, suggesting that a moral compass becomes inadmissible when it threatens wealth and power. Moreover, this passage in the novel reveals how a government like the Iron Heel intends to protect its group, even if it means making a socially influential figure like the bishop a scapegoat.

Bishop Morehouse may be one character that stands out when it comes to having his individual freedom taken away, but groups such as labor workers in the novel are also targeted by the Iron Heel. During the Gilded Age, labor workers were often seen as "modern slaves" (McCrossen 24), and this is also implemented in the narrative of *The Iron Heel*, as London calls workers "slaves of the machine" (London 48). Ernest at one point argues that workers are not "free agents" because they are "all tied to the merciless industrial machine" (45). He challenges the idea that workers are bound by the responsibility to care for their families, being economically and emotionally constrained, thus being forced to continue to work. Similarly, when Ernest states, "And the pathos of it and the tragedy is that they are tied by their

heartstrings. Their children- always the young life that it is their instinct to protect.” (45), his words illustrate how empathy and love transcend the gruelling conditions. Baum highlights that Mill also acknowledges this inequality by stating that unequal materials and opportunities for labor workers act as obstacles to their freedom (501). Characters such as Bishop Morehouse have their freedom of choice constrained by societal forces rather than formal laws. The Iron Heel enforces this control through methods such as isolation and ridicule, creating the illusion that freedom still exists while it is effectively restricted. From the perspective of Mill, this suggests that full individual freedom is unattainable under oligarchic rule in *The Iron Heel*, as freedom of pursuit is significantly constrained.

3.3 Freedom of Association

Freedom of Association is Mill’s third liberty, which entails that an individual has the right to engage, associate, and organize themselves with collective power, and is therefore free to join groups such as labor unions. He describes in *On Liberty* that freedom of association is “freedom to unite, for any purpose not involving harm to others” (Mill 27). Mill is again referencing the “harm principle”, meaning that this freedom is only applicable if it is harmless to others (27). In the case of an oligarchy, the suppression of freedom of association is inclined to be hindered. As Winters states, “Whatever power individuals have [...] is almost always magnified when actors mobilize into networks, associations, or movements that pursue common goals.” (12). Therefore, collective power from the people of the United States in the novel is a direct threat to the power of the Iron Heel. As mentioned in the framework, Winters also argues that “democracy and an oligarchy can coexist indefinitely as long as the unpropertied lower classes do not use their expanded political participation” (11), further implying that the power of the lower classes can challenge the power of the oligarchy.

This intimidation is clearly illustrated in *The Iron Heel*, since the oligarchy continuously attempts to diminish the existence of labor unions. In one of the later chapters, “The General Strike”, the United States goes to war with Germany because of an economic disparity to gain control of the global market, something that socialists and labor workers condemn. In response to this, they all collectively revolt, initiating a nationwide strike. This action demonstrates how collective power and commitment can result in change. Ernest is aware of the strength collective power carries, stating: “We stopped the war with Germany. Never was there so fine a display of the solidarity and the power of labor” (London 157), but this strength is also threatened by the oligarchy. Moreover, the novel describes the general

strike by stating: “Not a wheel moved in his empire. Not a train ran, not a telegraphic message went over the wires, for the telegraphers and railroad men had ceased work along with the rest of the population.” (153). The strike is described as a “political strike”, being a resort of desperation for labor workers, giving them the chance to collectively stand up for their rights after being “so badly beaten” (153). Although the strike reveals the power of the people, it is a great threat to the oligarchy, which the oligarchy interprets as a lesson: “The general strike was a warning. It should never occur again. The Oligarchy would see to that.” (154). This quote foresees the future of the novel, where the Iron Heel expands its forces to regain their power.

As a response to the general strike, the Iron Heel undermines the stability of labor unions while expanding the rise of the upper class, thus imposing a threat upon the freedom of association. The approach used by the oligarchy is to subsidize labor unions for machinery, iron and steel work, thus creating favourable conditions of work and preventing revolt from taking place, since the oligarchy is “assured of [the union’s] faithfulness” (160). As a result, Ernest argues that unskilled labor, such as coal miners and farmers, have their wages go down and bad working conditions increase, intensifying the exploitation, since “[they] are compelled to work now for the masters who robbed them” (160). Therefore, as concluded earlier, collective power from groups is vital to initiate change, and when the labor unions are divided, it becomes more difficult for the underrepresented to confront the powerful, which entails that the union association is ineffective. These few labor unions will not have the power to initiate another general strike, something Ernest suggests when arguing with the president of the Association of Machinists, saying: “Labor can and will rule the world. If you continue to stand with us, we’ll put an end to the reign of capitalism.” (158), again highlighting the importance of collective strength.

While the oligarchy does not enforce laws directly suppressing labor unions, similarly to how they do not enforce laws on expression, they still undermine the conditions necessary for a meaningful association, thus indirectly hindering the freedom of this association. Again, we find a parallel to Mill, who argues that the suppression of freedom imposed upon individuals from tyrant society “[penetrates] much more deeply in the details of life” (Mill 13), meaning that it is more harmful than that of a governmental suppression. The oligarchy in the novel thus also imposes a tension between reality and ideals, in this case presenting freedom of association as a legal reality, while its lived freedom is continued to be suppressed by underlying social and economic forces.

3.4 Illusion of Freedom

In the society of *The Iron Heel*, liberty is constructed as attainable through legal structures, while in practice, freedom functions as an illusion that conceals ongoing social and economic constraints. As concluded earlier, the oligarchy that concentrates the wealth and power in the novel does not suppress freedom of individuals directly through laws. By methodically and discreetly restricting expression, press, religion, collective power and more, the Iron Heel instead penetrates through using a systematic oppression that Mill describes as more damaging. By doing this, they sustain an illusion of the existence of liberty of expression, pursuit, and association, although characters like Ernest understand that real freedom is absent. This is revealed when Ernest discusses with a group of small-business owners who believe that “free opportunity for all” exists, which Ernest rebuts when saying, “the absurd thing about it is that you have repeated these phrases so often that you believe them.” (London 96), suggesting how he does not believe that freedom exists for everyone.

In *The Iron Heel*, the illusion of freedom is especially evident through the middle class, who not only act as the mediating class between the lower and upper classes, but also believe that they acquire the conditions necessary to become the upper class. However, the Iron Heel makes this belief a mere chimera by instead minimizing the middle class and creating a bigger economic disparity between the owners of the wealth. Economist Peter Temin discusses the consequences of an absent middle class by arguing that when the middle class shrinks, “democratic preferences no longer dominate policy decisions” (122). The oligarchy can therefore gain more power if the middle class disappears, since the economic disparities between the lower class and the upper class will be enlarged (122). At the end of the novel, this domination of power by the oligarchy is illustrated through the eventual death of the middle class, and among this “crashing of [...] small businesses and manufacturers, the trusts stood firm.” (London 127), highlighting that the big corporations continue to thrive.

Jack London further utilises the death of the middle class to illustrate that there exists an illusion that freedom is attainable in *The Iron Heel*. The chapter “Machine Breakers” investigates this especially when Ernest attends a dinner with middle-class businessmen and lectures them on the contradiction of being capitalists while at the same time not benefiting from capitalism. Most of the capitalists attending the dinner are small business owners, and they discuss how the bigger firms have absorbed their profits and made it harder for their businesses to expand, something they have all “gone into politics to legislate” (93). Their objective is to return to “fundamental American methods - free opportunity for all,” a “return

to the principles of [the] forefathers.” (96), since they believe that this is going to help them participate in the market. However, Ernest challenges their beliefs by stating, “When [you say] ‘free opportunity for all’, [you] mean free opportunity to squeeze profits, [...] You want opportunity to plunder your fellow-men in your own small way, but you hypnotize yourselves into thinking you want freedom.” (96). Ernest’s argument exposes how the capitalists are not complaining about the unjust system, but instead about their position in that system. They misunderstand their position in society, believing that they can rise to the big corporations, but the nature of the oligarchy and capitalism limits such upward mobility, therefore, creating an illusion of the existence of this freedom.

To develop this, the argument that the oligarchy benefits from the principles the capitalists want to return to is also made by acknowledging that, while such principles may be beneficial for small business owners (which they are not), they do not reduce the freedom of already powerful corporations. During the chapter “Machine Breakers”, the Iron Heel has not yet attained full control. Therefore, Ernest prefigures the rise of the oligarchy by stating: “When the combination of the trusts will control all legislation, when the combination of the trusts will itself be the government,” (99). He thus acknowledges that the freedom the small-business owners are fighting for is, in hindsight, going to suppress their other freedoms by being the ruling government. Freedom in *The Iron Heel* therefore operates more as an imagined reality, as unequal conditions prevent individuals from asserting the rights they are legally said to possess, such as freedom of expression, freedom of pursuit, and freedom of association. Highlighted by the small-business owners’ dream of a return to the opportunity of freedom and believing that “freedom for all” exists, the novel emphasises how even the more economically stable individuals can have their liberty taken from the Iron Heel.

3.5 The Three Liberties of Mill

The illusion of freedom in the novel suggests a tension with John Stuart Mill’s three liberties, since they all define the “appropriate region of human liberty” (Mill 26), meaning that they are necessary for human liberty, yet not fully realised in *The Iron Heel*. As mentioned earlier, Mill acknowledges that complete freedom cannot be attained by an individual if the three categories of liberty are not secured from social or legal prospects, although he continues by saying that “none is completely free in which they do not exist absolute and unqualified.” (27). Mill thus indicates that there is a limit to freedom, which, according to him, is the “harm principle”. Jack London illustrates through the novel that there are even more conditions that further limit

freedom. He thereby demonstrates through *The Iron Heel* how easily democracy collapses under conditions of concentrated economic power, all areas that limit Mill's three liberties.

Mill's distinction between legal and social liberty is also central to understanding the tension between perceived and lived freedom. He argues that freedom may exist formally while simultaneously being undermined by the "social tyranny" (Mill 13). *The Iron Heel* proceeds to reflect this idea by portraying a society where the lines between legal freedom and lived freedom are blurred. Liberties, such as the Constitution, appear to exist on paper, but are effectively controlled by economic powers. This is evident both in the suppression of labor workers, but also in the middle-class small-business owners, who fail to recognise these constraints. Therefore, as Ernest argues with the capitalists in "The Machine Breakers", freedom in the novel becomes structurally impossible under the oligarchy, as Mill's three liberties are systematically suppressed by the economic and political power of the oligarchy.

4. Conclusion

This paper has examined how Jack London's *The Iron Heel* depicts freedom as limited under the conditions of concentrated economic power, of an oligarchic government. The framework used for examining this perspective is drawn from philosopher John Stuart Mill's essay *On Liberty*, which was written in the mid-nineteenth century during widespread debates about freedom, political rights and social inequality. These broader concerns also remained relevant in later discussions of labor and capitalism, including those reflected in *The Iron Heel*. Mill presents his concept of the three liberties: freedom of expression, freedom of pursuit, and freedom of association, highlighting that all of them must be fulfilled for an individual to acquire true freedom. His three liberties are thus employed in this essay through an analysis of the novel's characters to show that the novel suggests that freedom under oligarchic rule is unattainable, as this system suppresses Mill's conception of liberty.

In *The Iron Heel*, the oligarchy suppresses the liberty of the people of the United States by methodically impeding the foundations that enable freedom, through practices such as granting privileges to select groups, exerting social pressure, and maintaining control through secrecy. No governmental laws are implemented that directly impose on liberty, which in turn creates an illusion that freedom in the society of the novel is attainable, although it is suggested that it is not. *On Liberty* suggests that both the government and society can impose harm on liberty, thus creating a difference between formal and lived freedom, something that is applied to the

novel. The people of the United States in *The Iron Heel* are through laws free to vote, engage in unions and able to achieve an education. Yet the constraints on lived freedom by the Iron Heel are revealed through a suppression of speech, press, opportunity, religion and more, making true freedom in *The Iron Heel* impossible if complying with the views of John Stuart Mill.

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