

Jack's Relationship with his Mother, Flora, and her "Strangeness"

To best understand Jack's relationship with his mother, we look to his own words. Take for example this exchange of letters between Charmian's Aunt Netta and Jack on July 11, 1907. Jack was in the south seas aboard his sailboat, the Snark, when he received this letter from Netta about his mother:

“. . . that woman is a horror in flesh and blood. She is in fact unforgiveably vile, and she isn't your mother, dear Jack. The very idea is preposterous . . . That ungrateful old hag!!! . . . Sometimes I feel like choking off the allowance you make just to see her wriggle awhile . . . She is horrible, horrible – full of mean innuendoes about the ones she depends upon for her living, and she would do you an injury as quick as the chance came. I never saw so utterly hopeless a woman – no redeeming trait in her. I should sicken and die outright if I had to live with her. And she is fattening on the good things you provide for her – swelling hideously in hips and paunch like a gorged swine. Jack, Jack – you darling, darling – don't you ever think you were born of anything so repulsive.”

In response, on July 25, 1907, Jack wrote:

“There is one thing at least, upon which you and I agree – namely, the character of my mother. I chortled with joy at every word you uttered anent your interview with her. Let me tell you right now that you have not seen one thousandth part of the real devil she is.”

Flora has been described as an “emotionally labile woman,” prone to “hysterical outbursts,” someone “who seemed unloving and rejecting to her only child, Jack.” She was given to gambling (the Chinese lottery) and “get-rich-quick-schemes.” Of his early life, Jack said: “I do not remember ever receiving a caress from my mother when I was young.” Jack's daughter, Joan, similarly commented: “[l]ove in all its warm humanness is something I cannot associate with Grandma.” Joan said she never heard her grandmother and father laugh together. She also believed that no one influenced her father more than Flora, and that “her role was almost wholly negative.”

Flora relied upon Jack financially starting in his childhood. One biographer reports that Flora encouraged Jack to work while in grammar school because he had developed “nervous tics” and she believed a job after school “would calm him down.” Joan said Flora believed “he needed the exercise.” Regardless of the reason given, Flora eagerly pocketed Jack's earnings from his various childhood jobs, telling him he had the stamina to take on even more. While he remained emotionally distant from his mother, Jack's financial support of her never wavered; it continued throughout her life.¹

On Flora's death, Charmian wrote in a letter to Anna Strunsky that “Jack had never loved his mother,” and that she (Charmian) had “underplayed” Flora's “strangeness” in recounting his childhood.

¹ Jack gave Flora \$60/month (when average income in U.S. was \$500/year), furnished her a house, and paid all her bills. Flora does not appear to have visited Jack at the ranch although in 1905, before Jack and Charmian moved into the ranch's cottage, Flora and Johnny (the son of Jack's stepsister, Ida) stayed overnight in Glen Ellen to see the new ranch.
© Kate Johnston updated 4/25/2026 bardjoi7@gmail.com

That said, Flora encouraged young Jack to write,² to enter the Call's pivotal writing contest where he won first prize for his essay about a typhoon, to turn down what could have been a financially stable postal job in favor of a wholly uncertain writing career, and she supported his return to school. Another indication of Flora's love is found in a letter she wrote him while he was tramping, stating that when she had not heard from him for three weeks, she was unable to eat or sleep from worry.

In contrast to Jack's and Joan's descriptions, Jack's childhood friend, Frank Atherton, described a warm and generous Flora. Johnny, Ida's son who Flora raised, had a loving bond with her. The principal of Jack's elementary school (Cole), described Flora as "a remarkable woman" with "a wonderful command of language," a "bright, cheerful philosophy of life and best of all, knew the nature of her boy thoroughly."

Her "strangeness," as noted by Charmian, however, does not appear in dispute. It stemmed in part from her interest in Spiritualism and the seances she hosted; seances in which she used young Jack as a prop.

A review of Flora's background sets the stage for her later occult endeavors. Flora Wellman (8/17/1843 – 1/4/1922), was from Massillon, Ohio. Her father was the "Wheat King" of Massillon so she grew up in comfort in a 33-room mansion. Flora's mother died shortly after she was born and while Flora was not fond of her stepmother, both her father and stepmother indulged Flora with the finest clothes and toys from New York, home tutoring, private schools, piano and elocution lessons. As a four-year old, she was described as "willful, stubborn, hot tempered."³ At a young age, Flora developed a fondness for "performing highly gesticulated dramatic presentations of poetry," which no doubt came in handy years later in her séance theatrics.

Besides the untimely death of her mother, Flora's formative years were marred by other hardships. At age twelve or thirteen she suffered from typhoid, stunting her growth (she only grew to 4' 6" tall), weakening her eyesight, and leaving her with little hair. A short time later, her father lost his fortune in the financial panic of 1858, bringing to an end "the fountain of luxury" to which she had become accustomed.

As a teenager, in 1860, she ran off to live with a sister. While she told one of her granddaughters that her leaving was spurred by an argument with her stepmother, "local history hints at an affair with a married man." She returned to Massillon for awhile and then left again, living at a boarding house in Seattle run by the former mayor of Springfield, Ohio. It was in Seattle where she met astrologer, William Chaney, and the two would eventually move to the more liberal city of San Francisco, living together from around 1874-1875. Chaney had no interest in Flora once she became pregnant with Jack and abandoned her, despite her two suicide attempts.⁴ She married John London, a widower with children of his own, in 1877. Flora did some work for the feminist publisher,

² Clarice Stasz writes that Flora also taught and encouraged Jack to read starting at age four. Jack wrote "I learned to read and write about my fifth year, though I do not remember anything about it. I always could read and write, and have no recollection antedating such a condition."

³ Flora continued her temper tantrums as an adult and Chaney found that Flora's "temper was a great trial . . ." According to some biographers, she also feigned heart attacks and fainting spells when unhappy with a situation.

⁴ For more information see "William Chaney – Jack's Putative Biological Father" (Johnston) and "Jenny Prentiss – Jack's Wet Nurse/Foster Mom" (Johnston).

Amanda Slocum,⁵ and supported liberal causes including the rights of women.⁶ She also earned money working as a seamstress, teaching piano, and giving seances.

Flora and her seances were part of the larger Spiritualism movement which was sweeping the U.S. in the late 1800s. The infamous Fox sisters are often credited with igniting its popularity with their fake seances.⁷ The sisters had cleverly learned to make rapping noises by cracking joints in their toes and hands, successfully fooling audiences into believing the “raps” were the spirits of the dead.

As a youngster, Flora would have been exposed to another “rapper,” Abby Warner, who lived in her hometown and claimed to communicate with spirits through various noises. Abby, virtually illiterate with a facial deformity, had been taken in by another Massillon woman, Mrs. Kellogg (a.k.a. Mrs. Gillett), who “trained” Abby in “various tricks of mediumship.” Abby was accused, tried and acquitted of making loud noises which disrupted Christmas eve services at a Massillon church in 1851. Eight-year-old Flora could not have escaped all the attention the Warner case garnered.

Seances and Spiritualism drew in millions of people from all walks, including scientists like Marie and Pierre Curie, or notables like Mark Twain, Frederick Douglass, and Queen Victoria, each curious enough to attend a seance. Mary Todd Lincoln even hosted seances in the White House.

After Jack’s death, Netta’s second husband, Edward Biron Payne, wrote the book, *The Soul of Jack London*, claiming Jack was communicating with him from beyond the grave. According to Payne, Jack was mostly communicating to apologize to Payne for not treating him better while Jack was alive. Payne also proffered that Jack was trying to continue his writing from the after-life through Payne.

Flora and Payne were not alone in their occult beliefs among Jack’s circle. Cloudesley Johns sent Jack clippings on telepathy to which Jack wrote back, “[p]lease do not forget that I am fairly scientific, & that I have a fair knowledge of fakes and fakirs [sic].” Upton Sinclair did telepathic experiments with his wife and noted that a psychic correctly predicted that he was carrying a letter from Jack in his coat pocket. Sir Author Conan Doyle, a contemporary of Jack’s, similarly held such beliefs and supported Payne’s claim of communications with Jack’s spirit in Doyle’s book, *The Edge of the Unknown*.

Flora may have viewed the Spiritualism movement as much as a lucrative business opportunity as a belief. In her money-making seances, she made use of her theatrical flair developed as a child. Five-year old Jack who was “nude except for an Indian loincloth, with Indian symbols painted on his face and chest . . . [was] forced by Flora to lie down on this table in this dark room . . .” and not move while Flora brought forth the spirit of a Native-American named “Plume.” Plume’s messages were punctuated with Flora’s “unexpected yells and gibberish.”⁸ Jack’s foster mother, Jenny Prentiss, objected to

⁵ Slocum “was a Spiritualist, suffragist, editor and master printer.” She and her husband published *Common Sense*, a journal about Spiritualism, suffrage, and other issues. Flora lived with the Slocums after Chaney abandoned her and while pregnant with Jack.

⁶ Flora may have supported some liberal causes but she boasted about her racial purity and had an extreme dislike of Italians, among others, which she inculcated in Jack at a young age. This racial indoctrination could have proved fatal for young Jack who became very ill after an Italian boy urged him to consume tumblers of wine. Jack felt compelled to drink the wine or risk being stabbed in the back by the Italian boy.

⁷ The huge number of deaths during the Civil War and the desire of those grieving to stay connected with their deceased loved ones is thought to have contributed to the movement’s popularity.

⁸ Flora would fall into these Plume trances without warning and when Jack’s first wife, Bessie, first saw her do this, she threw a glass of water on her believing Flora was having a seizure. Flora became infuriated while Jack “was roaring with laughter.”

Flora's use of Jack in her seances after witnessing the nightmares and emotional distress it caused him.⁹ Jack's childhood home was known as the "spook house" to his classmates.

Given these early childhood experiences, it's not surprising that as an adult, Jack had little tolerance for Spiritualism or anything occult. He wrote that having "lived my childhood and boyhood life amongst spiritualists" made "an unbeliever of me."¹⁰ Jack's friend, Harry Houdini, even worked to expose psychics as frauds or illusionists. Towards the end of his life, however, Jack was very much taken with the work of psychologist, Carl Jung, a proponent of such theories as myths as expressions of the collective unconscious, archetypes, and synchronicity.¹¹ It would be interesting to know how Jack would view Jung's theory of synchronicity (basically a meaningful coincidence), which developed largely after Jack's death, given its paranormal overtones. Maybe we should have a séance and ask him. 😊

Written by Kate Johnston, updated 4/25/26. (Jack's Facts #18)

Resources:

- Labor, Leitz, Shepard, *The Letters of Jack London: Volumes One through Three*, (1988) Stanford, Stanford University Press, pp. 21, 148, 151, 234, 255, 347-348, 377, 448, 532, 558, 700-701, 1415-1416
- London, Joan, *Jack London and His Times* (1939) Seattle & London, Univ. of Wa. Press, pp. 2-6, 12-14, 22-30, 67, 82, 168, 195, 204, 212, 224-225, 296
- London, Joan, *Jack London and his Daughters* (1990) Berkeley, Heyday Books, pp. 109, 113-123
- London, Charmian, *The Book of Jack London, Vols. 1 and II* (1921) New York, The Century Co., Vol 1: pp. 34, 35, 252; 11: 353-360
- Labor, Earle, *Jack London* (1974) New York, Twayne Publishers, pp. 61, 115
- Labor, Earle, *Jack London: An American Life*, (2013) New York, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, pp. 3-4, 14, 16-17, 24-28, 59-60, 73-74, 80-81, 142
- Kingman, Russ, *A Pictorial Life of Jack London* (1979) NY, Crown Publishers, Inc., pp. 15-25, 35, 48, 62, 88, 97, 152, 163
- Kingman, Russ, *Jack London: A Definitive Chronology*, (1992) CA, David Rejl/Jack London Research Center, pp. 1, 24, 57, 65
- Kerr, Crowley, Crow, *The Haunted Dusk: American Supernatural Fiction, 1820-1920* (1983) Athens, Georgia, Univ. of Georgia Press, [Watson, Charles N., jr., *Jack London: Up from Spiritualism*, pp. 193-207]
- Stasz, Clarice, *Jack London's Women* (2001) Amherst, Univ. of Massachusetts Press, pp. 3-6, 21, 25-26, 31, 33-34, 47, 49, 81-82, 109-110, 146, 221
- Kershaw, Alex, *Jack London: A Life* (1977) NY, St. Martin's Griffin, pp. 11-13, 195, 217, 287, 291

⁹As Jack got older, he referred to his mother's seances as a type of entertainment or comedy.

¹⁰After Jack's death, Charmian spurned consolation by "well-meaning believers assuring her that Jack's spirit survived." She also chastised Upton Sinclair in 1930 that had he spent more time scrutinizing mediums, his views would be more skeptical. According to author Stasz, however, "[s]he also experienced 'beatitudes,' her term for fugue states in which she found herself living in past times and cultures."

¹¹Jack may have been a scientifically-based realist but he remained open to the possibility of other realities, both in his writings and personal life. He explored supernatural themes (evil curses, ghosts, astral projection, etc.) in his writings. (See, e.g., *The Star Rover*, *A Ghostly Chess Game*, *The Mahatma's Little Joke*, *Planchette*, *The Eternity of Forms*, among others.) Earle Labor suggests that Jack's Yukon stories are dominated by "an instinctive mysticism" rather than "a logical positivism" and that Jack refused "to acknowledge the nonrational element that was a vital part of his creative genius – a natural gift inherited from his spiritualist mother." According to Dale Walker, Jack had his horoscope cast in 1905. Charmian recalled how in 1913, distressed over the passing of a young woman, Jack timidly confided to her that he had done something he had never done before: "I concentrated every thought and actually tried to call that girl back . . . Of course, there was no answer." Jack also made notes for a "Future Story Metaphysical" before dying.

- Lasartemay, Eugene P. and Rudge, Mary, *For Love of Jack London: His Life with Jennie Prentiss – a True Love Story* (1991) New York & Los Angeles, Vantage Press, pp. 25-28, 36-37, 41-56, 58-59, 78-80
- Haley, James L., *Wolf: The Lives of Jack London* (2010) New York, Basic Books, pp. 113, 236
- Reesman, Jeanne Campbell, *London in his own Time* (2020) Iowa, Univ. of Iowa Press, p. 41
- Hedrick, Joan D., *Solitary Comrade: Jack London and His Work* (1982) Chapel Hill, Univ. of No. Carolina Press, pp. 16-18, 172
- Underhill, Dr. A., *The Arrest, Trial and Acquittal of Abby Warner in St. Timothy's Church, Massillon, Ohio* (1852) Cleveland, Gray & Wood Plain Dealer Steam Press, pp. 1-32.
- Gabel, Stewart, *Jack London: A Man in Search of Meaning, A Jungian Perspective* (2012) Indiana, AuthorHouse, *en passim*
- Payne, E.B., *The Soul of Jack London*, London, Rider & Co., *en passim*
- Doyle, Arthur Conan, *The Edge of the Unknown* (2020 reprint of 1930 ed.) FV Editions, p. 73
- Walker, Dale, *Jack London, Sherlock Holmes, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* (1974) Amsterdam/NY, Private Press of Alvin S. Fick, *en passim*
- Walker, Dale, *The Alien Worlds of Jack London* (1973) Michigan, Wolf House Books, *en passim*
- Cep, Casey, "Why Did So Many Victorians Try to Speak with the Dead?" *New Yorker* (May 24, 2021) [print edition "Kindred Spirits" 5/31/21]
- Houdini, Harry, *A Magician Among the Spirits* (1924) New York, Harper & Bros., pp. 2-16
- Sinclair, Andrew, *Jack: A Biography of Jack London* (1977) New York, Harper and Row, pp. 11, 176
- Williams, Jay, *Arthur Under Sail: The Imagination of Jack London 1893-1902* (2014) Lincoln & London, Univ. of Nebraska Press, pp. 21-23, 29-31, 67, 85-86, 90, 476
- Ahterton, Frank Irving, *Jack London in Boyhood Adventures* (2014) U.S., High Desert Branch of the Ca. Writers Club, pp.108-110, 163, 166
- Raskin, Jonah, *The Radical Jack London* (2008) Berkeley, U.C. Press, pp. 13, 16-17, 23
- Viotte, Michel, *The Lives of Jack London* (2018) Ontario, Firefly Books Ltd., p. 14
- <https://london.sonoma.edu/biographies/flora-wellman-chaney-london>
- https://www.foundsf.org/Women_in_Printing
- https://iapsop.com/archive/materials/common_sense/
- <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/seances-in-the-red-room>
- <https://archive.org/details/magicianamongspi00houd/page/n5/mode/2up>
- [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8e/The arrest, trial and acquittal of Abby Warner \(IA arresttrialacqui00unde\).pdf](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8e/The_arrest,_trial_and_acquittal_of_Abby_Warner_(IA_arresttrialacqui00unde).pdf)