

Summary Article: **The Jungle**
from *The Literature of Propaganda*

OVERVIEW

The Jungle (1906), a work of fiction by American journalist and novelist Upton Sinclair, portrays the lives and working conditions of poor, typically immigrant meatpackers in the slaughterhouses of Chicago at the turn of the twentieth century. The narrative focuses on the travails of Jurgis Rudkus, a Lithuanian immigrant to the United States who suffers humiliation and loss in his attempts to achieve the American Dream. In the final chapters, he stumbles on a laborers' gathering and finds salvation in socialism. Sinclair, a member of the Socialist Party of America since 1902, spent weeks in Chicago doing research in order to write about the condition of workers in the industry for the socialist newspaper *Appeal to Reason*, in which the novel was first serialized between February and November 1905. Although his intention was to fight capitalism and promote socialism, audiences largely ignored his depiction of unscrupulous labor practices and the shameful treatment of workers, panicking instead about the unsanitary conditions in which meat was processed.

Although several publishers rejected the novel because of its grimness and violence, *The Jungle* caused an instant sensation upon its publication in book form. While most of the reading public was not sympathetic to Sinclair's political views, readers were horrified by the novel's revelations. Public uproar and personal concerns quickly pushed President Theodore Roosevelt to send inspectors to Chicago, and their official report led to the 1906 passage of the Federal Meat Inspection and Pure Food and Drug Acts. Although Sinclair failed to win many converts to socialism, he raised suspicions about the abuses of capitalism, and *The Jungle* won lasting success as an iconic work of muckraking, or exposé journalism

HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

From the 1860s to the 1890s, the United States underwent a period termed the Gilded Age, which saw ostentatious growth in the prosperity of a small sector of the population alongside a rapidly growing underclass. Millions emigrated from Europe to fill the need for urban workers, many of whom were poor, non-English speaking, and illiterate. As they crowded into cities to become what some called "wage slaves," living conditions deteriorated, leading to outbreaks of dysentery, cholera, and other deadly diseases. Government implementation of public services, such as sewer systems, was slow, and in these dangerous and unsanitary conditions, workers earned barely enough to survive. Despite the rise of labor unions, rampant corruption hindered the enactment of worker protection laws.

Key Facts

Time Period: Early 20th Century

Genre: Novel

Events:

American Gilded Age; growing economic disparity; rise of socialism

Nationality: American

By the time Sinclair's novel was published, the public was already sensitized to the problem of tainted meat. During the 1898 Spanish-American War, Chicago meatpacking companies were commissioned to supply U.S. forces in Cuba; in order to maximize profits, the industry sent adulterated, poorly preserved, and spoiled meat, causing an untold number of deaths. Roosevelt himself had eaten tainted meat while serving during the war. Although a court of inquiry brought no charges, the publicity had done its damage. In the summer of 1904, Sinclair traveled to Chicago to cover a strike of the nascent Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America. The strike failed when the Big Four meatpacking companies employed strikebreakers to man the assembly lines. The acts later passed by Congress fell short of Sinclair's hopes for labor reform. Although the Meat Inspection Act provided for federal oversight of meat production, Sinclair feared inspectors would be easily bribed and business would continue as usual.



*Workers skinning lambs at a Chicago meat-processing plant in 1906, the year Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* was published. © CORBIS.*

Although *The Jungle* was innovative for its choice of subject matter, it followed in the tradition of American naturalism, an extension of the literary realism movement. Naturalism went beyond realism in its insistence on a moral purpose for art and on social determinism, which usually led to a pessimistic outlook. Naturalist writers often linked their work to industrialization and attempts at social reform, numbering Karl Marx among their influences. French author Émile Zola's *Germinal* (1885), a harsh fictional exploration of an 1860s coalminers' strike, provided inspiration for such American writers as Stephen Crane, whose novel *Maggie* (1893) portrays prostitution in the slums of New York; Theodore Dreiser, whose *Sister Carrie* (1900) focuses on consumer culture; and Frank Norris, who wrote *The Pit* (1903) about manipulations in the Chicago wheat trade. Sinclair particularly strove to emulate Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), the hugely successful novel that was often dubbed as abolitionist propaganda.

The Jungle is often also cited as the foundational text of a new style of investigative journalism.

Following Sinclair's lead, writers have used the medium to expose various inequalities and injustices, often portraying the individual as powerless. According to journalist and novelist Karen Olsson in a 2006 essay for *Slate*, however, fiction is not these writers' primary vehicle: "Sinclair's heirs today are writers of literary nonfiction, who derive their drama from facts." Muckraking documentary films in this vein include *Nickel and Dimed* (2001), *Fast Food Nation* (2002), and *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006). Although much of Sinclair's work is now out of print, the author still lives in the public imagination. Writer and scholar Chris Bachelder's satiric 2006 novel *U.S.!* posits Sinclair's repeated resurrection and murder in the present day, representing the fortunes and undying conviction of the American left alongside right-wing hysterics and violence over a feared Socialist takeover.

PRIMARY SOURCE

EXCERPT FROM *THE JUNGLE*

It was only when the whole ham was spoiled that it came into the department of Elzbieta. Cut up by the two-thousand revolutions-a-minute flyers, and mixed with half a ton of other meat, no odor that ever was in a ham could make any difference. There was never the least attention paid to what was cut up for sausage; there would come all the way back from Europe old sausage that had been rejected, and that was moldy and white—it would be dosed with borax and glycerine, and dumped into the hoppers, and made over again for home consumption. There would be meat that had tumbled out on the floor, in the dirt and sawdust, where the workers had tramped and spit uncounted billions of consumption germs. There would be meat stored in great piles in rooms; and the water from leaky roofs would drip over it, and thousands of rats would race about on it. It was too dark in these storage places to see well, but a man could run his hand over these piles of meat and sweep off handfuls of the dried dung of rats. These rats were nuisances, and the packers would put poisoned bread out for them; they would die, and then rats, bread, and meat would go into the hoppers together. This is no fairy story and no joke; the meat would be shoveled into carts, and the man who did the shoveling would not trouble to lift out a rat even when he saw one—there were things that went into the sausage in comparison with which a poisoned rat was a tidbit. There was no place for the men to wash their hands before they ate their dinner, and so they made a practice of washing them in the water that was to be ladled into the sausage. There were the butt-ends of smoked meat, and the scraps of corned beef, and all the odds and ends of the waste of the plants, that would be dumped into old barrels in the cellar and left there. Under the system of rigid economy which the packers enforced, there were some jobs that it only paid to do once in a long time, and among these was the cleaning out of the waste barrels. Every spring they did it; and in the barrels would be dirt and rust and old nails and stale water—and cartload after cartload of it would be taken up and dumped into the hoppers with fresh meat, and sent out to the public's breakfast. Some of it they would make into "smoked" sausage—but as the smoking took time, and was therefore expensive, they would call upon their chemistry department, and preserve it with borax and color it with gelatine to make it brown. All of their sausage came out of the same bowl, but when they came to wrap it they would stamp some of it "special," and for this they would charge two cents more a pound.

THEMES AND STYLE

The central and unrelenting theme of Sinclair's novel is that capitalism is inherently flawed, even evil, and that socialism, as a more just and legitimate economic and political system, represents a cure for society's troubles. After arriving in a country full of financial promise, Rudkus and his family are systematically torn down by their new life. They are swindled when they buy a house and are surrounded by filth, crime, and exploitation. They endure freezing cold, injury, and illness, and when they can find jobs, they face constant danger at work. The factory owners are "men every bit as brutal and unscrupulous as the old-time slave drivers." The serialized version of *The Jungle* hewed closely to a naturalistic portrayal of the immigrant experience, with Rudkus ending up in prison. The published version, however, cut by five chapters, concludes with the protagonist discovering socialism and regaining his self-respect: "That he should have suffered such oppressions and such horrors was bad enough; but that he should have been crushed and beaten by them ... that was a thing not to be put into words, a thing not to be borne by a human creature, a thing of terror and madness!"

Through unconditional support and sympathy for workers and immigrants, Sinclair works to cultivate the empathy of his audience, gradually creating in the reader the same desperation for change that Rudkus feels. Twenty-seven of the book's thirty-one chapters exhaustively illustrate the problem before the final chapters introduce a resolution that many readers experience as out of place. Despite the critical consensus that the novel's rhetorical strategy is blatantly didactic and overwhelms the development of characters and scenes, *The Jungle* serves the author's purpose of exposing the harsh reality of the lives of immigrant workers.

Stylistically unsophisticated, the novel does little to disguise Sinclair's opinions and intentions. His tone, which varies with the events he recounts, is sometimes unemotional and severe, presenting gruesome incidents and cruel injustices as everyday events. In one scene the narrator relates that the bosses sometimes lie when a worker has been killed: "[I]t was the easiest way out of it for all concerned. When, for instance, a man had fallen into one of the rendering tanks and had been made into pure leaf lard and peerless fertilizer, there was no use letting the fact out and making his family unhappy." Personal experiences are conveyed in simple language, and the participants are rendered almost distant from their pain in the hopelessness of their situation. At one point Rudkus's son is "burning up with fever, and his eyes were running sores; in the daytime he was a thing uncanny and impish to behold, a plaster of pimples and sweat, a great purple lump of misery." When the final chapters introduce the protagonist's revelatory experience at the socialist meeting, the tenor is suddenly sentimental and propagandistic as Rudkus contemplates "the glory of that joyful vision of the people of Packingtown marching in and taking possession of the Union Stockyards!"

CRITICAL DISCUSSION

The Jungle's popular success spurred its translation into seventeen languages within months. The reactions of critics were mixed, however. Although some considered the novel a masterpiece and an important work of social criticism, it was just as often dismissed as too biased in its politics and its hatred of the rich. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the novel's early reception was the reaction of Roosevelt. In a 2006 article for *Mother Jones*, Chris Bachelder notes, "Roosevelt's individualism clashed with Sinclair's socialism, but he shared Sinclair's distaste for the 'arrogant and selfish greed on the part of the capitalist.'" In terms of the reception of the book as an exposé of tainted meat production rather than of the mistreatment and suffering of the working class, Olsson points out, "in part the book invites this misreading. As a Socialist novel it's unconvincing: The ending, in which Jurgis Rudkus converts to socialism, is the worst part of the book."

Having recently celebrated its centennial, *The Jungle* has been reevaluated and its author has been the subject of new critical biographies. Although the novel has never been considered of literary importance, Anthony Arthur makes a good case in his 2006 biography, *Radical Innocent*, that the opening chapter is among the best in American literature. Olsson describes the work's "seething energy that sweeps you along." Still, Bachelder writes, "structurally it lacks the pleasing symmetries and contrasts, the subtle patterns of imagery and metaphor that we expect from great and lasting works." Nevertheless, most critics agree that Sinclair's novel has lasting value as a vivid portrayal of the immigrant experience and of the clash of ideals that occurred during the Progressive Era.

UPTON SINCLAIR: IDEALIST

Author Upton Sinclair was born in Baltimore, Maryland, to parents who came from wealth, though his family was financially ruined during the Civil War and Reconstruction. He was exposed to two radically different social classes—his own struggling family's and that of his mother's still wealthy parents, whom he frequently visited. Soon after beginning college, he started writing magazine articles and dime-store novels to pay for his education. When he took the assignment to report on the stockyards and workers' strike in Chicago, he reportedly blended in easily with the other workers because of his shabby appearance.

After he published *The Jungle*, he used the proceeds to establish Helicon Hall Home Society, a utopian colony in Englewood, New Jersey—although within a year the colony suffered a fire and disbanded. During the 1920s he became more actively involved in politics, representing the Socialist party for California, first as a candidate for the House of Representatives (1920) and then as a candidate for the Senate (1922); however, both bids were unsuccessful. In 1934, two years after the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt as president, Sinclair ran as the Democratic candidate for governor of California and lost by a slim margin. He returned to his prolific writing career and won a Pulitzer Prize in 1942, publishing more than ninety books by the time of his death in 1968.

Continuously in print since 1906, *The Jungle* has been a staple of what Bachelder calls the "muckraking mini-unit in American History." Although the contemporary public considered its revelations as truth, scholar Louise Carroll Wade questions Sinclair's journalistic integrity. In a 1991 article for *American Studies*, she states, "most immigrants were not passive victims of exploitation... In spite of low wages and often harsh working and living conditions, most established a foothold and in time experienced some upward mobility." Some critics have noted that modern readers may be more inclined to look for social and political ideas and facts in works of nonfiction and that the contemporary use of novels as vehicles for propaganda is usually unsuccessful. Even once-influential explicitly political or moral works such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Grapes of Wrath* might not be as well received today. Olsson writes, however, that Sinclair's most famous work is still taught in high schools and colleges across the country partly because it is fiction, pointing out that almost no muckraking nonfiction of the period appears in current curricula.

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