

Topic: The Jungle by Upton Sinclair

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Abstract

In *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair exposes the truth about meat packing plants in the early 1900s, including the horrible treatment, low wages, and long hours of immigrants new to America. The ruthless corruptions who fail America are everywhere, from the heads of political parties to the lows of city alleyways. Author Upton Sinclair illustrates how the lies of the “American Dream” crumble apart. We follow characters Jurgis and his wife Ona through their tragic eye-opening experiences living as Lithuanian immigrants in the city of Chicago. In this essay I will connect the ideas from this book to the inequalities that immigrants, the working class, non-english speakers, and many Americans, have all faced and still face today.

The Jungle by Upton Sinclair illustrates the haunting disadvantages that immigrants and low-class men and their families faced during the early 1900s. Written by a man who lived through it, *The Jungle* does not hold back when it comes to revealing the truth about the terribly rotten and infested meat that was processed in the Chicago stockyards, the corruption that led to a handful of millionaires controlling starving, bosses working men like dogs, and the hazardous workplaces and neighborhoods that caused many deaths, often swept under the corporation's rugs never to be talked about.

The book starts off with introductions of a family, circling around a young Lithuanian man named Jurgis and the wedding to his wife Ona. We enter the book on a bittersweet note as an expensive and beautiful wedding is described, yet each person's belongings becomes abruptly defined by the hours of work or the amount of food prepared to pay for each piece: "She wears a white shirt-waist, which represents, perhaps, half a week's labour painting cans" (Sinclair 15). Mentions of blood poisoning and finger amputations blur happiness. A cough formed from hours of endless working in a cold and damp basement arise from guests at the wedding. The night becomes eerie as the couple begs for the day not to end, as work would start the next morning and all of the joy that their sparse money brought them, on the day of their wedding, would vanish. Sinclair does a great job of starting the story out on the only positive scene of the book, young love that ultimately would not last, and a wedding that became the only instance of happiness in their entire lives in America.

When Jurgis goes to work on his first days in Chicago, he is young and strong. He sees older, weaker men pleading for a chance to work at the gates of the slaughterhouse and gives them no mind. He scores a job on his first day. The chilling things he sees in the workspace do not faze him or any of the workers. Like machines, workers can not stop, and if they do, then

somebody else would be picked to take his place. Jarring details of the meat packing plants only became worse when winter rolls around. Workrooms and killing beds are not heated, and workers take extreme measures to prevent frostbite: “Now and then, when the bosses were not looking, you would see them plunging their feet and ankles into the steaming hot carcass of the steer, or darting across the room to the hot-water jets. The cruelest thing of all was that nearly all of them, all of those who used knives were unable to wear gloves, and their arms would be white with frost and their hands would grow numb, and then of course there would be accidents” (Sinclair 93). The same meat that the men used for heat, is packaged and printed as a fresh product and shipped around the world. Many of the telling stories made me feel sick, and I could not believe some of the things that big companies were able to get away with due to corruption in higher ups, leniency in health inspections, disregard for worker’s lives, and the cruel long winter hours that nearly killed men, and often did.

Unfortunately, when it comes to strenuous work hours, we see similarities today. Published on July 21, 2021, an NPR article titled, “Striking To End 'Suicide Shifts, Frito-Lay Workers Ask People To Drop The Doritos” details how factory workers are facing long shifts and poor working conditions, claiming 100 degree workplaces and 80+ hour work weeks in today’s world. Discrimination against the working class, and the view that laborers are less important than middle and upper class people stems from classism. Capitalists benefit from cheap labor and are able to keep people poor and therefore trap them in a double bind.

Our main character Jurgis finds himself out of work for injuries twice. The first time, Jurgis twists his ankle while slipping in a puddle of cattle’s blood at his workplace. The corrupt company lawyer issues no fault to the company, and therefore they would not pay Jurgis or keep his spot at work safe while he recovers. Jurgis and his family are financially challenged, and

Jurgis' injuries force him out of work. The thought that his wife would have to find work and support him does not fit his standards for his ideal of a family, where he sees himself as the breadmaker, and not his wife. He becomes depressed, has aggression, anxiety, and sleepless nights. The second time he is out of work for an injury sustained in the steel plants, he can not find work anywhere and is desperate for money, begging for his life and sending children in the family to make money selling newspapers. The children are out of school, and the corruption from the city, the ways of the newsboys, and the long hours force them to live in the city, where they were stuck living, learning, and becoming friends with the wrong crowd of people.

Jurgis learns about multiple instances of his wife being raped by her boss, and he beats up the man responsible, landing himself in jail. It would not be the first time that he would be incarcerated. Both men give the court their perspective of what happened, and the word of Jurgis is dismissed with a laugh coming from the judge. Little did Jurgis know that the judge, lawyer, and big boss are friends. Factors that have nothing to do with an offense, affect sentencing, such as age, race, ethnicity, employment, and the number of previous arrests. In the early 1900s, as well as today, we see the correlation between crime and unemployment, feelings of hopelessness, poverty, and low socio-economic status. Jurgis is forced to leave his pregnant wife and his family to fend for themselves as house payments, debt, food costs, firewood cost, and fear riddle them. In the month that he is in prison, he is unable to help his family, and when he is released, he comes back to see that his home was taken away, his wife's dies during childbirth, and his family has no money.

If this wasn't bad enough, he settles with his demons and found a job to try to make a living with the sole purpose of supporting his baby boy (the only inkling he had left of his dead wife), only to come home from the steel plant after his first week to learn of his only child's

tragic drowning. No book, no story, has ever torn hope from my fingertips as violently as this one. My heart dropped, first when Jurgis lost his wife, and next at the sudden death of his infant. It was here that I took a second to examine the life that they had come to America to live. Had he imagined imprisonment, the early death of his wife, or the corrupt judicial system? Would he have warn others who would make the same mistakes as he did if he had known?

“He and his family, helpless women and children, struggling to live, ignorant and defenceless and forlorn as they were and the enemy that had been lurking for them, crouching upon their trail and thirsting for their blood! ...and then all the tricks of the packers, their masters, the tyrants who ruled them, the shut downs and the scarcity of work, the irregular hours, the cruel speeding-up, the lowering of wages, the raising of prices! The mercilessness of nature about them, of heat and cold, rain and snow; the mercilessness of the city, of the country in which they lived, of its laws and customs that they did not understand” (Sinclair 212).

This book opened my eyes, and filled them with tears -- tears for the families that were affected, then, and today, tears for this fictional family whose terrible experiences were all but fictional, and tears for the men and women who died trying to make a living in a world of lies. The book ends on a note of socialism, when Jurgis finds a group of people who help him when he is at his lowest.

He engages in this new world of ideas, and the book ends after a speech from one of the socialists he is listening to: “and we shall organize them, we shall drill them, we shall marshal them for the victory! We shall bear down the opposition, we shall sweep it before us and Chicago will be ours Chicago will be ours ! CHICAGO WILL BE OURS!” (Sinclair 413). This book addresses many of the inequalities we have learned about, ranging for racial and gender

discrimination to prisoner inequalities in the criminal justice system, political fear and bias, and classism. I have a hard time deciding if I enjoyed reading this book, because of the rage, sadness, hopelessness, and anxiety I felt while reading it – yet I think it is an important book for people to read.

Citations

Romo, Vanessa. "Striking to End 'SUICIDE Shifts,' Frito-Lay Workers Ask People to Drop The Doritos." *NPR*, NPR, 21 July 2021

Sinclair, Upton. *The Jungle*. New York: Penguin Books, 1985. Print