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CLASSIC

THE JUNGLE

UPTON SINCLAIR

Includes detailed explanatory notes,
an overview of key themes, and more

THE JUNGLE



Upton Sinclair

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INTRODUCTION

The Jungle:

A SHOT AT THE HEARTS
(AND STOMACHS) OF AMERICA



No other American novel of the twentieth century provoked as much public uproar as Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906). In fact, with the exception of Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1857), no American book yet written has proved so influential. It is the story of an honest, hardworking Lithuanian immigrant, Jurgis Rudkus, who comes to Chicago at the turn of the twentieth century with hopes of making a good life for himself and his family. Instead, he encounters a series of misfortunes and degradations as a result of his own ignorance and the powerful forces of unrestrained capitalism and political corruption. Rudkus's sad story highlights the many injustices and pitfalls of American political and social systems.

Sinclair researched the book during seven weeks in Packingtown, a section southwest of Chicago where stockyards, slaughterhouses, factories, and the tenements that housed the workers were located. An outspoken socialist, Sinclair meant for *The Jungle* to be an indictment of the evils of unchecked capitalism. It was a common theme for him. Several of Sinclair's novels take aim at American "trusts," or industrial monopolies, such as the Oil Trust (a frequent target of protest writers) and the Coal Trust. In *The Jungle*, he

took on Chicago's Beef Trust. *The Jungle* provides excruciating, accurate detail about the dangerous, appallingly unsanitary working conditions in early-twentieth-century packing houses and factories. Sinclair hoped to inspire outrage for the plight of the workers. But, as Sinclair later commented, "I aimed at the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach." Readers, including President Theodore Roosevelt himself, were revolted by what they read about how food was handled and prepared and demanded an investigation. *The Jungle* did not spark a socialist revolution, but it did prompt the implementation of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, a sweeping reform measure.

Much of the pathos of *The Jungle* is just as powerful today as it was 100 years ago, mainly because the issues it highlights are unresolved. Forced prostitution, child labor, and sweatshops are more prevalent than ever before in much of the developing world. And the United States certainly cannot claim to have eradicated all of its social evils. Thirty-three million Americans, many of them children, live in poverty today, despite the fact that the United States is the wealthiest nation on the planet. Readers cannot help but feel a pang of social conscience while following the paths of Jurgis Rudkus and his family through the "jungle" of early-twentieth-century Chicago.

The Life and Work of Upton Sinclair

Upton Sinclair was born in Baltimore in 1878 to a poor but genteel family of Southern "aristocrats" financially ruined by the Civil War. His father, an alcoholic liquor salesman, moved the family to New York in 1888, and by the time young Upton was fifteen years old, he was already writing dime novels and stories for pulp fiction magazines. Determined to gain an education, he enrolled at Columbia University in 1897 and paid his expenses by writing a dime novel a week.

Sinclair married his first wife, Meta Fuller, in 1900. The

two had a son, David, but the union was unhappy and marred by poverty. During this difficult period, Sinclair discovered socialism and became a regular reader of the weekly socialist magazine *Appeal to Reason*. In 1904, the editor of *Appeal to Reason* commissioned the young writer to create a story about immigrants in Chicago's Packingtown district. The result was *The Jungle*, which was published in serial form in *Appeal to Reason* in 1905, and in book form in 1906. It was an overnight success, selling hundreds of thousands of copies. In 1905, Sinclair joined other prominent socialists—including famous novelist Jack London (author of *Call of the Wild*) and Clarence Darrow (who became nationally famous twenty years later for his role in the "Scopes Monkey Trial")—to form the Intercollegiate Socialist Society. Success did not change Sinclair's political convictions. He used the profits he received from sales of *The Jungle* to establish a socialist community called Helicon Home Colony in New Jersey. Writer Sinclair Lewis (author of *Babbitt*) was one of the members. Helicon was destroyed by a fire four months after it was opened.

Sinclair's next few novels were commercial failures, and his marriage ended in divorce in 1911. In 1913, he was remarried to a woman named Mary Craig, who was his steadfast companion and champion until her death in 1961. In 1914, the couple moved to Croton-on-Hudson, New York, where he became part of a community of socialists and radicals. The advent of World War I caused a split among the socialists. Sinclair argued that the United States should help fight the Germans, who had been accused of multiple atrocities in Belgium. He made his case public in the journal *The Masses*. War correspondent and fellow socialist John Reed (who would later write *Ten Days that Shook the World*, about the October 1917 revolution in Russia) argued against him in the pages of the journal. The disagreement prompted Sinclair to quit the socialist party and move to Pasadena, California.

In their home in Pasadena, the Sinclairs entertained many prominent figures, including silent-film actor Charlie Chaplin, automobile pioneer Henry Ford, and famous physicist Albert Einstein. Sinclair and Einstein corresponded regularly over the years and developed a warm friendship.

Despite abandoning socialism (temporarily), Sinclair remained committed to writing about social and political issues. His novel *King Coal* (1917) was based on a labor dispute. *Boston* (1928) treated the widely publicized, controversial Sacco-Vanzetti case. (Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, politically radical Italian immigrants to Massachusetts, were railroaded by a biased judge who was suspicious of their ties to anarchism. They were found guilty of robbery and murder and, despite international outcry, were executed in 1927.) In 1926, Sinclair returned to the socialist party and made an unsuccessful run for governor of California. In 1927, he published *Oil!*, considered by some critics to be his best novel.

In 1934, during the heart of the Great Depression, millions of Americans were out of work and in desperate straits. In this year, Sinclair launched a second attempt to become governor of California, this time as the Democratic candidate. He lost again, but his socialist message had appealed to many voters who felt victimized by the failure of capitalism: the winning candidate got 1,138,620 votes, and Sinclair got 879,537.

When World War II broke out in Europe, Sinclair once again broke with the socialist party and urged U.S. participation. He foresaw the threats posed by the Nazi Party and Adolf Hitler. Sinclair's novel *Dragon's Teeth*, about Hitler's rise to power, won him a Pulitzer Prize in 1943.

Sinclair kept on writing at a prodigious rate throughout the 1950s and '60s. After his wife Mary died in 1961, he was married for a third time to Mary Elizabeth Willis. She died in 1967. Sinclair died in New Jersey in 1968.

Historical and Literary Context of *The Jungle*

After the Civil War, the United States began to feel in full force what Europe had been struggling with for decades: the impact of industrialization. Factories of all sorts began appearing in the major Eastern and Midwestern cities, and, lured by the promise of high wages, people began abandoning their agricultural pursuits in favor of industrial jobs. The population in cities like New York, Boston, Chicago, Baltimore, and Pittsburgh boomed, doubling and doubling again in the span of a decade.

Vast fortunes were made in such industries as steel, railroads, and oil. "Captains of industry" like Cornelius Vanderbilt, John D. Rockefeller, and Andrew Carnegie made hundreds of millions of dollars and built up powerful business conglomerates that controlled entire industries by establishing legal trusts that allowed them to sidestep laws against business monopolies. The men in charge of these trusts determined everything about their industries, from how much to charge for goods to how much to pay workers, and ruthlessly destroyed any potential competitor.

The United States was blessed with vast natural resources that helped feed the industrialization of the country, but the resource most needed was labor. Building transcontinental railroads, operating steel mills, slaughtering and processing livestock by the hundreds per day, drilling for oil, manufacturing textiles, and all other industrial occupations required millions of skilled and unskilled workers. Wages for factory jobs were deceptively high (workers often did not realize that along with their higher wages came the higher cost of living in a city), which attracted many men, women, and children to factory jobs. Many of these new urban workers were immigrants, drawn by the promise of good jobs and prosperity in the United States. In the first decade of the twentieth century, 8.8 million immigrants settled in the United States and 41 percent

of new arrivals in cities were foreigners. The new urban population did not find the high quality of life they had hoped for. Instead, they found themselves living in hastily constructed, unsanitary tenements and working long hours in dangerous factories for inadequate pay. With no individual bargaining power against powerful trusts and no political recourse (city politicians were notoriously corrupt), the workers were trapped in a hellish existence.

Two developments seemed to offer hope: unions and socialism. There had been disorganized labor movements and sporadic protests, walkouts, and strikes since the 1870s (including the Railroad Strike of 1877). But the successful organization and mobilization of workers in unions did not occur until the mid-1880s, with the establishment of the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor. Several industry-specific unions were also founded around this time. The unions managed to push through some beneficial changes (like the eight-hour workday), but, by and large, they exerted little power. Strikes like the Homestead Steel Strike of 1892 and the Pullman Strike of 1894 were squashed by professional strike busters or the U.S. government itself.

Socialism and unionism went hand in hand. Socialism in the United States was a reaction to the excesses of capitalism. In 1900, the richest two percent of Americans controlled thirty-three percent of the nation's assets; the richest ten percent controlled seventy-five percent. That left the vast majority of Americans without much wealth or property. Socialists advocated cooperation, not competition, between companies, and favored a centralized (i.e., governmental) system for the equitable distribution of wealth. This idea naturally appealed to the laborers who were toiling in factories for little material reward. The Socialist Party in American politics saw some spikes in popularity in the early 1900s and again in the 1930s, both periods of widespread labor abuses and unemployment.

The Protest Novel: Is It Literature?

The problem with most protest novelists is that they fail on two levels: they are too concerned with pushing an agenda to worry about writing good novels and their novels usually do not end up producing social change. There are exceptions, of course, and the exceptions are noteworthy because they *are* good novels that *do* produce social change.

The preeminent protest novel in American literature is Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1857 classic *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The moving antislavery novel was a huge bestseller that spurred abolitionists into increased activity. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was part of a literary tradition of Victorian sentimentality in which authors frequently moralized about the behavior of their characters. Sinclair, on the other hand, was working in a period in which Naturalism was the dominant literary mode. Naturalism is basically a gritty form of literary realism in which characters—usually uneducated, urban characters—are at the mercy of their environments, their heredity, and their passions. Naturalistic novels have contemporary, realistic settings, and often feature violent or grotesque subjects and events. Prominent Naturalists include Stephen Crane (author of *The Red Badge of Courage*), Frank Norris (author of *The Octopus*), and Theodore Dreiser (author of *Sister Carrie*).

Sinclair was, to use a term coined by President Theodore Roosevelt to describe several writers working at the turn of the century, a "muckraker": a protest writer with a definite political agenda. *The Jungle* has many Naturalist qualities, but its socialist agenda makes it, first and foremost, a prime example of protest fiction. Other writers of great protest fiction include: John Steinbeck (author of *The Grapes of Wrath*), Richard Wright (author of *Native Son*), George Orwell (author of *Animal Farm*), and Chinua Achebe (author of *Things Fall Apart*).

CHRONOLOGY OF UPTON SINCLAIR'S LIFE AND WORK



- 1878: Upton Beall Sinclair Jr. born on September 20 in Baltimore, Maryland. Son of Upton Beall Sr., a traveling salesman, and Priscilla S. Harden Sinclair. Grows up in Baltimore and New York City.
- 1897: Graduates from City College of New York. Supports himself by writing jokes for magazines and almost 100 pseudonymous "dime novels" for Street and Smith and by doing other hack writing. Takes graduate courses at Columbia University from 1897-1901.
- 1900: Marries Meta H. Fuller.
- 1904: Publication of *Manassas*, considered his best early novel and his fifth "serious" novel. Encouraged by an editor at the *Appeal to Reason*, Sinclair spends seven weeks reporting and working in disguise in Chicago's packinghouses to research *The Jungle*. Moves with Meta and son David to a small farm in New Jersey.
- 1906: Publishes *The Jungle*, which becomes a best-selling sensation. Founds utopian society called Helicon Hall in Englewood, New Jersey. Runs as Socialist Congressional candidate.
- 1907: Helicon Hall burns down.

- 1908: Establishes theater company for the production of socialist plays.
- 1911: Divorces Meta Fuller Sinclair.
- 1913: Marries Mary Craig Kimbrough, a poet.
- 1914: Moves to southern California permanently.
- 1920: Runs again as Socialist Congressional candidate.
- 1922: Runs for U.S. Senate from California.
- 1925: Publishes *Mammonart*.
- 1926: Runs for governor of California as a Socialist.
- 1927: Publishes *Oil!* and *Money Writes!*
- 1928: Publishes *Boston*.
- 1930: Runs for governor of California again as a Socialist.
- 1933: Publishes *I, Governor of California, and How I Ended Poverty*.
- 1934: Runs for governor of California on the Democratic ticket. Unites various progressive groups to form the EPIC (End Poverty in California) League.
- 1940: Publishes *World's End*, the first book in the Lanny Budd historical novel series. Writes ten more novels in the series between 1941 and 1953.
- 1943: Receives Pulitzer Prize for *Dragon's Teeth*.
- 1961: Mary Craig Kimbrough Sinclair dies. Marries Mary Elizabeth Willis.
- 1962: Publishes *The Autobiography of Upton Sinclair*.
- 1968: Sinclair dies on November 25 in Bound Brook, New Jersey.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF *The Jungle*



- 1890: Congress passes the Sherman Antitrust Act, deeming illegal all contracts, combinations, and conspiracies in restraint of interstate and foreign trade.
- 1894: Cattle butchers go on strike in sympathy with striking railroad workers and to demand a wage increase. Rioters destroy railroad cars going to the stockyards. Nine-week strike fails, with packers blacklisting strikers afterward.
- 1897: Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America, a new international union organizing packinghouse workers, is formed.
- 1898: The Treaty of Paris ends the Spanish-American War. The United States gains recognition as a world power. The first Food and Drug Act is enacted due to public outrage over the tainted beef U.S. soldiers were given during the Spanish-American War. Michael Donnelly, a sheep butcher, is elected president of the Amalgamated union and sets out for Chicago's stockyards. Eugene V. Debs helps establish the Social Democratic Party in the United States, later known as the Socialist Party.

- 1900: Women working in one of Chicago's largest meat-canning plants go on strike to protest wage cuts. Debs runs for U.S. president on the Social Democratic Party ticket. Chicago is the second largest city in the United States, with 1.6 million residents, many of whom are recent immigrants.
- 1902: Swift, Armour, and Morris establish the National Packing Company, a virtual monopoly, otherwise known as the Beef Trust.
- 1903: U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor established.
- 1904: Sympathetic strikes occur throughout Chicago and the United States. By September, Chicago experiences 92 strikes in different industries. At noon on July 12, 28,000 Chicago meat-packing workers clean their tools and go on strike to demand a minimum wage for all workers, and are joined by thousands of other workers in Chicago and around the country. Impressively organized and peaceable, the strike fails after several months, with disastrous results for the union.
- 1905: The Supreme Court dissolves the Beef Trust. Debs founds Industrial Workers of the World, a labor organization based in Chicago.
- 1906: Pure Food and Drug Act is passed, prohibiting the sale of adulterated foods and drugs and requiring labels stating contents. Congress also passes the Meat Inspection Act due to disclosure of conditions in Chicago's meat-packing plants.
- 1908: Supreme Court rules that union boycotts of industry restrict trade and are thus illegal. Congress passes law regulating child labor in Washington, D.C.
- 1911: Supreme Court dissolves the Standard Oil Company and the American Tobacco Company.

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THE JUNGLE

