

A Review Of: The Jungle

*Book By: Upton Sinclair*

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Through *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair painted a picture of the unique difficulties poor, immigrant, factory families faced. He did this not only by describing the plight of the Lithuanian family but also by drawing a parallel between this family and non-immigrant families living in the same era. *The Jungle* explicitly elaborates on the struggles of the immigrant family from cradle to grave, from country to country, and from job to job. There is no telling the exact magnitude of the struggle the family undergoes, but the holistic approach Sinclair takes shows us that the life of an immigrant factory worker was much more difficult than the life of a non-immigrant factory worker.

As Ona, Jurgis, and the rest of the family first arrive in Packingtown, they begin to see the horror almost immediately. The gloom of the meatpacking district is first highlighted by the continuous regression of light as they enter the community. Furthermore, they begin to notice the grass and plants becoming more and more of a rarity. The odor and the darkness of the town bring reality to the situation for the family. Unfortunately, this was only a precursor for the bumpy road ahead of them.

Though some positions were safer than others, all factory positions were full of workplace hazards and dangers. Jurgis was the first family member to be introduced to the factory system when he received a job at Durham's, a cattle processing factory. Here, Jurgis' eyes would be opened to many workplace horrors, the most severe of which would come during winter. During the winter, more than ever, families would fight for a source of income. This only perpetuated Durham's ability to reduce the quality of the workplace. In one winter at Durham, part of a young boy's ears broke off and the men waiting outside for employment started to freeze together. The few that were lucky enough to have jobs were forced to work in blood-soaked clothes, many of which froze solid during the winter. The workers using knives could not

wear gloves which put them at risk as their hands began to freeze. Though these conditions were far from desirable for all, immigrants worked for less pay in less desirable situations often times because the conditions that they emigrated from were much worse.

The family went through a series of ups and downs but the one guaranteed element of their lives was the lack of reliability in the factories. Marija lost her position several times which caused her to become a type of slave to her conditions. Other family members lost jobs which only pushed them to pursue work in less desirable conditions. As was the case with Marija, one day the factory workers were employed and the next day they were starving. For immigrants, finding a job was often difficult due to a language barrier. The family, especially Jurgis, really struggle with the difficulties presented with an inability to provide for each other. As a family, they took pride in the strength they provided one another. Eventually, their ability to provide for each other takes a turn for the worst after Jurgis injures his foot and is bed ridden. After every person shifts places or loses a source of income, Sinclair focuses on the affect this life change has on the individual and the family. The injury of Jurgis causes a chain reaction among the family members. Rooted in stress, the strong foundation begins to fall in an instant.

To draw a picture of the lives of the immigrants in *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair had to draw an elaborate picture of poverty during the factory era. As the family found out, the homes of the time were built as a money trap for anyone ignorant enough to fall into it. As is the case with many elements of an immigrants life, ignorance is often confused for a language disconnect and these non-English speakers found themselves living in these homes more often than their English speaking counterparts. Poverty during this time was non-discriminatory. It reached everyone. This was described when Durham placed an ad asking for 200 men (later released as a typo) and 3,000 men were waiting outside the doors in hopes of making a handful of coins every

day. In the life of the family, monetary decisions were important. When Jurgis was able to purchase a few supplies for the house, Sinclair demonstrated the depth of their poverty when he detailed that the family had to discuss where to hang the few nails that they had in their possession.

In class, we learned some very basic realities of the factory system. First, we discussed how, though undesirable, many citizens wanted to work in the factories as this was often the only way to earn their wages. As the factory owners saw this disparity, they began hiring cheaper employees to do harder work. Simultaneously, we learned of the increase of immigrant workers in America at this time. These workers were faced horrible discrimination and ostracization as Americans knew that these immigrants were taking the factory jobs for lower wages. Furthermore, we learned that conditions in the factories were so terrible that it was often said that these factory workers had worse working conditions than the plantation slaves of the south.

Sinclair detailed a unique poverty contributor in the lives of the factory worker when he discussed the influence of alcohol. Though an expense, alcohol would prove to be a consistent part of the lives of the poor factory workers. During the winter, the factory workers could choose to eat in the freezing cold of the factory or they could rush to find solitude in a near liquor store or bar. This brief break would help them feel warm when returning to work and would return a portion of their motivation. To perpetuate this alcohol cycle, Sinclair explains how families and wives often were stranded at the bars looking for their husbands. The only way for them to return through the cold was to drink to warm up.

Culturally, the family in *The Jungle* is rather different from the other families in Packington. This cultural difference presented many difficulties unique to immigrants in the

meat packing district of Chicago. The first and most obvious obstacle present was the language barrier. Ona, Marija, Jurgis, and the children all had difficulties speaking English. This made finding employment or assistance difficult. When they first arrived, one of the very first English words they learned was “job” so they could seek employment. This inability to speak English would also make it difficult to negotiate and find help when it was needed. Shortly after arriving, the family was presented with the opportunity to buy a home. They were skeptical at the incredible opportunity and would later find out their skepticism was well placed.

Culturally, Lithuanians lived differently than Americans of the time. The family was very solid in traditions with the wedding of Ona and Jurgis as well as the way that they lived and the way that they raised their children. These traditions presented unique difficulties for the family through their time in Chicago. Specifically, the Wedding would set the family over one-hundred dollars into debt. On the contrary, the cultural significance placed on togetherness is something that helped the family through tough times. Grandmother Majauszkiene told the family of the history of the town and Szedvilas, the owner of a delicatessen helped the family from their arrival in Chicago.

Though Sinclair respectfully painted a picture of poverty in all of the meatpacking district of Chicago, he also described a handful of influences that were unique to immigrants in the factory system. The Lithuanian family often times found themselves taken advantage of as a result of either a language barrier or a cultural difference. First, the lawyer and the real estate agent take advantage of the family in the unfair sale of the house. From what we learned from Grandmother Majauszkiene, they were not the first immigrant family to move in and out of this home. When Ona was on a train, she was again taken advantage of. Culturally, the family had a fear of the men in uniforms as they had been oppressed by similar men. This was difficult to

them because these are the men they would need to ask for assistance. Because of the terrible conditions of many of the countries the people emigrated from, many had a type of unconditional love for the American life. This love would lead them to take extra risks and look past potential dangers. Sinclair outlined this type of blind following when he introduced Jurgis to the unions he had despised so much. Surprisingly enough, for a short time, the union was a very attractive system to Jurgis and, eventually, would lead him to a state of unconditional love for America. In the end, Sinclair showed to us the little amount of knowledge immigrants have about the dangers in their lives. As a direct response to the language barriers the family faced, Jurgis soon found a passion for learning English. This extra responsibility, though free, placed a time burden on the family that is unique to immigrant families. Sinclair also explains that even if they had adequate knowledge of these dangers, they would not know how to properly address or prevent them. This cultural and linguistic difference would follow the family through the death of a child, prison, and many other life changes.

By introducing us to an immigrant family ridden with a series of ill-timed misfortunes, Sinclair succeeded in painting a raw image of the difficult lives of the immigrant factory workers. From the all too common alcohol cycle to the miserable work conditions and employment uncertainties, being a factory worker was unbearable. Sinclair showed us the raw and unique difficulties of an immigrant family in Chicago. He showed us the struggles being a non-English speaker present. We saw what a strong cultural bond can provide between a family of immigrants as well as what a strong bond to traditional cultures can do to a break a family. Most importantly, we learned of the level of intense pressure and scrutiny the factory system placed on its workers; especially immigrant workers. Sinclair drew a very appropriate metaphor

between the cattle in the stockades and the immigrants being funneled through the factory system, one generation after another.