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The Jungle By Upton Sinclair

In response to increasing industrialization and exploitation of immigrant workers in the late 1800s and early 20th century, *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair painted a fictional yet an exciting picture of labor and political power in the early industrial society. Although the political fiction was published more than a century ago focusing on the trials of industrial workers at that time, *The Jungle* is still relevant in modern American economics of government control, organized labor, industrialization and the American dream for foreign workers. Sinclair makes use of the knowledge he had acquired working in conditions at that time to paint a detailed picture of the immigrant industrial workers. The significance of the book is not limited to the American progressive era, the scope of Sinclair account of the history touches the current day immigration issues, economic development, government regulation and the role played by labor organizations. This text reviews the vivid account Sinclair critique on social, political and economic challenges through the lens of a poor immigrant family.

The book begins with Jurgis Rudkus' marrying with Ona, a girl he had fallen in love with him back in Lithuania and recently moved there with other family members. The group that came to Chicago included Dede Antanas, Jurgis's father; Elzbieta, Ona's stepmother; Jonas, Elzbieta's brother; Marija, Ona's orphan cousin; and Elzbieta's six children. The American dream for Jurgis starts with financial issues. Unlike the custom in Lithuania where wedding guests give money to cover the wedding cost, Jurgis is unable to ask the guests to do the same as

he feels they are also struggling as well to make ends meet. Apart from the challenges of finding a job, the family is also exploited when renting a house. Although Jurgis' job is exhausting, he believes that earning 45 dollars is better than being unemployed. Dede is also used as he gives part of his wages to a person who helped him secure the job. Eventually, the working condition becomes harsh, and Dede passes away from excessive labor.

Meanwhile, Ona is pregnant, and Jurgis faces a dilemma of asking her to find a job in her condition because they need money as he will not be able to feed the whole family alone. At some point after winter, Jurgis is unable to find a job and he starts drinking alcohol. The work at the fertilizer factory is dangerous which makes the whole family sick, but they have no other choice but to continue working. Afterwards, Jurgis is imprisoned for thirty days after he attacked Ona's boss upon finding out that the boss forces her to sleep with him before being paid. Consequentially, the family is evicted from their home after failing to raise the bills.

Tragic befalls the family more after Jurgis is released from prison. Ona dies when giving birth to their second child. Not long after that Antanas drowns, Jurgis flees Chicago to get away the misfortune following his family. He soon regains his strength and finds a job digging tunnels. The new lifestyle does not last long, as he is injured. Shortly afterwards he is imprisoned for attacking barkeeper who tried to steal his money. Opportunity strikes when Jurgis starts to make money after befriending the Chicago's underworld. He joins a socialist rally and campaign for change. One day he meets Mariga who by now is working as a prostitute and is heroin addict. He feels ashamed and responsible for the outcome of each of the family members' life. The novel ends on a hopeful note when Jurgis finds a job at a hotel. He feels a spiritual transformation within him with the hope and faith for a better future.

The American dream turned out to be different than Jurgis and his family had envisioned. Through the connection of Jurgis's immigrant family, Sinclair indicates some of the harsh realities foreigners faced then and now when coming to pursue the American dream. While according to them the dream promised a better life through financial and political freedom, it was far from the reality of discrimination and exploitation. Sinclair criticizes those who come to America seeking rich life not knowing about the greed that exists in their desired land. Such situation is not limited to the immigrants alone but the American working class as well.

Interestingly, the title of the book can indicate the plight of workers. All struggles in life could result in society forgetting the fundamental humanitarian principles. Sinclair constantly worrying for money erodes the entire dream and breeds predatory social setting (176). An example is seen when Ona is forced to sleep with her boss to get her payment. Sinclair does well in showing this aspect of society that may not be spoken out loud at the time. Readers, especially those familiar with how the capitalist society works, will be interested in following the struggles of Jurgis and how social structure can sometimes cause harmful effects on individual's life.

It is difficult not to like Sinclair with his description of socialism, and how he advocates for the rights of workers. At first, Sinclair attracts the readers' attention with the gruesome experience of the immigrant family. Then Sinclair becomes more aware of the theory of socialism which he supports at the end. Here, Sinclair uses Jurgis to debate on his strong advocacy for socialism and inequality in wealth distribution. He says that the power of concentrated wealth could never be controlled, but could only be destroyed. (186). Sinclair equating capitalism to enslavement that should not be tolerated provides a persuasive argument that can easily sway a procapitalist to agree with his side of the debate.

Anti-socialist may find the beginning of the book alluring and intriguing. However, they will criticize the subsequent chapters with an argument that Sinclair overviews the experience of the Lithuanian family to spread his socialist ideology. Although it may seem awkward with the way Sinclair declares that socialism is the answer, he does excellent work on exposing the plight of workers at the time. The book is a perfect must read for anyone interested in a work of fiction that highlights the actual problems that society encounters daily even in modern society. His journey of unveiling the dangerous working condition in the meat packing industry could touch anyone even if they do not agree with his socialist ideology. The book is likable and provoking at the same time in that it unearths the underlying issues in the society that are being ignored. Sinclair shows how the community trounces Jurgis. Specifically, the greed by the few in community dehumanizes those suffering. Throughout the book, Sinclair demonstrates how society has turned into the enemy of its people. In return as shown in the protagonist life, his soul grew blacker with vengeance, defiance and raging hate occupying his mind (94).

Sinclair provides a profound knowledge of industrialization. Insightfully and energetically he describes Jurgis' life which a reader may perceive as an exaggeration. The book is perfect except with the way it ends. After telling about a thought-provoking lifestyle of Jurgis, Upton Sinclair finds it appropriate to end the novel on a positive note instead of the dark note that had dominated the book all along. The ending is more dramatic when Sinclair insists that socialism is the solution to Jurgis' problems and society at large. Sinclair should have tried to portray the American dream using a more gentle approach than debunking the whole concept. The ending should have been stronger than merely relying on socialism to solve the challenges workers were facing at that time. Besides, instead of focusing on the negativity, he should have added some kind of a lesson on how hard work can lead to success.

In conclusion, *The Jungle* is a good book that demonstrates the potential suffering the society puts upon its people. It is a work of fiction that highlights the social, political and economic challenges dominated by greed not only in the progressive era but sadly touching on a crucial issue affecting the society today. The lesson learned from the book is about the underlying truth of the two layers in the American culture. There are those individuals who are economically and politically powerful and the rest who are supposed to follow them. Therefore, it is a good book recommended to everyone.

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Work Cited

Sinclair, Upton. *Jungle*: Published by Upton Sinclair. 1906

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