

UPTON SINCLAIR'S *THE JUNGLE*: THE LEGAL AND SOCIAL IMPACTS
OF A CLASSIC NOVEL

by

Ashley McIntyre

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Professor Neal Fortin

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The consumers are reliant on the food industry daily, and as a result they have fallen victims to its faults in the past. Upton Sinclair, a muckraking journalist of the early 1900s exposed to the nation an industry of deceit and filth, which resulted in not only awareness but political reform. This paper will argue that Sinclair's *The Jungle* greatly impacted the change in the perceptions and regulations of the food industry. Part I will set forth an explanation of the grotesque depictions explored in the novel and Part II will consider the social impact to the findings in the book. In Part III, this article will assert that the publishing of *The Jungle* and the social response to its content has substantially impacted the food industry politically.

I. EXPOSING A FAULTY SYSTEM: SANITATION CONCERNS

Upton Sinclair explores the shockingly unsanitary and utterly disgusting conditions of the food industry while following the life story of a Lithuanian man named Jurgis and his family as they travel to the United States with high hopes of becoming successful in the land of opportunity. However along the way, Jurgis and his family find that the plants of Packingtown which employ the working class of Chicago are conniving enterprises manipulating the citizens to purchase and eat unfit food. The exposing of this evidence is clearly important for the understanding of the great influence this text had on society.

In times where factory conditions were not a concern and children were often found among adults working full-time jobs, opportunities were scarce and some sacrificed their lives attempting to provide for their families. *The Jungle* not only nonchalantly discusses the frequency of blood-poisoning in the plants among its employees, but describes a working environment where men can be up to their ankles in animal blood. The character Anatanas, who found a job only after promising a cut of his pay to his employer, discovered as a “squeedgie man” in a pickle-room that after the beef had been lying in chemicals people he would then sleep away the vats off the filthy floor into a tube that fell onto another floor. After a while, someone would clean out the tube and then throw the contents into a truck with the fresh meat preparing for sale¹. This is the type of practice that regularly existed at the many different plants in Packingtown.

Sinclair relays that on the killing-beds one could be covered in blood from head to toe and during the winter months men would wrap newspaper around their feet in order to soak up this blood. He continues on to explain how in order to keep warm, at times when the bosses are not looking the employees have been known to force their limbs into the “steaming hot carcass of the steer.”² Not only is this practice dangerous for the workers, but it lies even more dangerous for the general population. With limited to no germ control, these plants manifested food full of diseases.

These packers were undoubtedly known for their foulness. He illustrates these men covered in blood, and with literally no place to wash their hands, they would “eat as

¹ Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004) 65.

² Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004) 85.

much raw blood as food at dinnertime.”³ While this is utterly gross to begin with, the public falls victim once again to unsanitary conditions as the men eventually began to wash their hands in the water used to be ladled into the sausage.⁴ When animal blood combined with human germs is inserted into sausage that is consumed by millions each day for breakfast, it is not only unsanitary but it becomes adulterated by rendering injurious to the health of the public. And these were only some of many examples of adulteration exhibited in the meat packing industry in the early 1900s. Nonetheless, unsanitary conditions are best described in the section of the novel where Sinclair explains:

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 dried dung of rats. These rats were nuisances...they would die and then rats, [poisoned] 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 such a poisoned rat was a tidbit.”⁴

This rat-infested meat was being shipped for sale into the homes of Americans on a daily basis and no one in the factory opposed such repulsive practices—or at least not enough to speak up and potentially lose their jobs over it. And rats were not the only things that made the conditions unsanitary. The plague of Egyptian flies would come in large intimidating swarms that invariably were exposed to the meat as the house would become “black with them.”⁴ Jurgis and his family quickly learned that the sausage that

³ Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004) 108.

⁴ Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004) 141-142.

they so often ate in Lithuania was not the same sausage they found in the United States. The color, flavor and substance were made up of chemicals; and they were packed with potato flour, an adulterant banned from use in Europe.⁵ It is this same smoked sausage which kills Jurgis's nephew Kristoforas. An hour after eating smoked sausage Kristoforas, a young boy, started yelling out in exclamations of great pain and convulsing. Within minutes he was dead.⁶ Adulteration was very common and Packingtown's plants each usually had a chemistry team on hand to enhance, or hide the flaws of its contents. A friend, Jonas, had explained to the family that the meat that was taken out of the pickle was usually found to be sour, and in order to hide the foulness the workers would rub it up with soda to take away the smell.⁷

This type of practice was unfortunately not unusual. Aunt Elzbeita worked in a sausage sector of the plant and noticed first-hand how there is barely any attention paid to what was cut up to make the sausage. Sinclair alludes that there are many occasions where the meat is moldy and white that had been rejected by Europe only to find its way into the meat packing plants of Chicago. The sausage would be coated with borax and glycerine and then dumped into the hoppers to be made over with the other meat; as she understands, "for it was custom... whenever meat was so spoiled that it could not be used for anything else, either to can it or else to chip it up into sausage...they use everything of the pig except the squeal."⁷ Even the meat they deemed to be "smoked sausage" was simply added with brown gelatin and borax to color and conserve it by the chemistry department. Otherwise, it was no different than any other sausage that was

⁵ Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004) 123.

⁶ Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004) 132.

packaged in the plant.

While adulteration was of no concern to the packing companies, a government inspector was present—however unreliable and inconsistent. Jurgis noticed on his first day at work as a “shovellor of guts” that the floor-bosses had maneuvered ways to quickly and cost-efficiently deceive the consumers for gain. A “slunk” calf, the meat of a cow about to calve or that has just calved, is unfit for food. Jurgis noticed that there is a law maintains that employees notify the floor-bosses of the continual appearance of these cows, a law of which they adhere to. Nonetheless, when notified about this unfit meat, the bosses merely walk away with the inspector discussing the issue, while the meat is cleaned out and processed with the perfectly good meat.⁸ Food was a major spread of disease during this time. While plants had government inspectors to check pigs for tuberculosis, Sinclair explains that these inspectors were usually sociable people who would be easily distracted by those passing, and would not regret missing dozens of pigs.⁹ This diseased pork slid by the government inspecting and into the hands of unknowing Americans.

Adulteration made definitions of food and expectations complex; however the misbranding and false labeling of food was even more overwhelming. There are hams described as spoiled, which were normally pickled and sold as “Grade Three” ham to consumers. After discovering how to remove the bone from it, usually removing the majority of the smell, all ham was then labeled as “Grade One” ham of the highest

⁷ Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004) 140.

⁸ Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004) 67.

⁹ Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004) 41.

quality. More ingenious labeling issues are explored:

The packers were always originating such schemes—they had what they called 'boneless hams,' which were all the odds and ends of pork stuffed into casings; and 'California hams,' which were the shoulders, with big knuckle-joints, and nearly all the meat cut out; and fancy 'skinned hams,' which were made of the oldest hogs, whose skins were so heavy and cooked and chopped fine and labeled 'head cheese'!"⁷

The consumers were simply there for the manipulating as packers originated ingenious theories of how to make meat more cost effective and efficient. And whatever waste could not be used, whether from a diseased animal or not, it could be turned into fertilizer that was used on farms across the U.S. exposing plants, animals and landowners to possible diseases as well.¹⁰ While the citizens had faith in the government inspectors, their health needs were relentlessly ignored. Sinclair's exposing of the scheming meat packing industry increased the awareness of such practices occurring daily.

A. The Social Impact of The Jungle

The time period directly following the publishing of Sinclair's novel was one of which the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) was administered. While there are many factors that contributed to this, *The Jungle* helped an unaware audience recognize that there needed to be change. Though Sinclair's primary intentions were to promote a type of ideal socialism, he understands that the sections discussing the flaws of the meat packing industry were monumental in awakening the readers to their fate as consumers. Sinclair is known for commenting on the massive response to his book, "I aimed at the

¹⁰ Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004) 134.

public's heart and by accident I hit it in the stomach.”¹¹

A commonly said poem and phrase of this time was, “Mary had a little lamb/ And when she saw it sicken/ She shipped it off to Packingtown/ And now it's labeled chicken”.¹¹ All joking aside, the government knew that this grand response required rules and regulations necessary to save the people from an over-powering food industry. The social push for regulation of food allowed for the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906.

This Act, signed on June 30, 1906 by President Theodore Roosevelt, is also known as the Food and Drugs Act, originated the Food and Drug Administration. This act also included a Meat Inspection Amendment—consequential of Sinclair’s findings. This statute “[prohibits] the “misbranding” of any foodstuff or pharmaceutical offered for sale or their “adulteration” by any ingredient not specified on the label. It also explained that an adulterated food is a food containing “any added poisonous or other added deleterious ingredient which may render such article injurious to health,” later being revised to remove the term “added” from the definition and gave a distinct separate designation to substances or toxicant added or non-added.¹² This act created some type of regulatory standards so that the consumers would no longer have to warily guess about the substance they are buying or eating.

The Jungle is commonly accredited for this major act, though it is understood by the author of this paper that it is not the sole source that pushed for reform. While some

¹¹ George J. Annas, “FDA's compassion for desperate drug companies,” [***The Hastings Center Report***](#). Jan-Feb 1990: p35.

¹² Neal Fortin, “Chapter 1: Introduction to Food Regulation in the United States”:January 2008.

could argue of the novel's significance, the reader acknowledges that using muckraking techniques—gory details, disgustingly true imagery—Sinclair forced his audience to re-evaluate certain governmental systems. This also caused the United States government to act on problems concerning the people that had long been ignored.

B. The Political Impact of The Jungle

Upton Sinclair aimed to raise awareness to the negative intensities of the labor industry, and is marked by his fame for exposing a grotesque meat-packing industry that left Americans sick to their stomachs. According to the Center for Disease Control, Sinclair began a revolution of adaptation to inspection and processing procedures. The CDC credits Sinclair for creating the public stir which forever will impact the food industry. *The Jungle* revealed that the sources of many diseases affecting those of the 20th century could be prevented by taking sanitary precautions and implementing thorough inspections. The CDC explains how such awareness led to steps taken that saved the health of many;

“In 1900, the incidence of typhoid fever was approximately 100 per 100,000 population; by 1920, it had decreased to 33.8, and by 1950, to 1.7. During the 1940s, studies of autopsied muscle samples showed that 16% of persons in the United States had trichinellosis; 300-400 cases were diagnosed every year, and 10-20 deaths occurred. Since then, the rate of infection has declined markedly; from 1991 through 1996, three deaths and an average of 38 cases per year were reported.”¹³

Sinclair not only impacted lives through his book, he saved some as well.

The USDA also credits Sinclair on the birth of the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS). In *The Jungle*, the ignored inspection of meat causing disease and

¹³ United States, Center for Disease Control, Achievements in Public Health, 1990-1999: Safer

sickness to Americans surfaced. The passing of the Meat Inspection Act and federal funding for the FSIS and FDA have resulted from the public outrage. Sinclair wrote a letter to President Theodore Roosevelt in 1906, begging that he send undercover inspectors to Chicago's meat-packing factories. When Roosevelt responded with the Neill-Reynolds report, he found not only that there was truth in Sinclair's claims, but that there would need to be immediate action taken to save the food industry. Jake Bell, an FSIS inspector for over 40 years, explained how before Sinclair's book the inspectors at the factories would rely on general senses to determine safe meat from unsafe meat. "As we learned more about animal diseases, pathogens, food safety, and sanitation," he pointed out, "the agency added and developed more sophisticated inspection and testing methods."¹⁴

The Federal Meat Inspection Act impacts the inspection procedures, and also the American public which consumes the meat on a consistent basis. The FMIA requires inspection of livestock before slaughter, and specific inspection instructions for the livestock postmortem. The Act also set a standard of absolutely necessary sanitary expectations and "allowed the USDA to issue grants of inspection and monitor slaughter and processing operations, enabling the Department to enforce food safety regulatory requirements."¹⁵ As a result of a single book, Sinclair

and Healthier Foods. <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm4840a1.htm>: 1999.

¹⁴ United States, United States Department of Agriculture, *USDA NEWS: 90 Years Worth of Inspection*. <http://www.usda.gov/news/pubs/newslett/old/vol56no3/article5.htm>: March 1997.

¹⁵ United States, United States Department of Agriculture, *Agricultural Outlook: Economic Research Service, The Livestock Sector*. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/agoutlook/Dec2002/ao297f.pdf>: December 2002.

encouraged reform and additions to necessary legislation that consequently altered the food industry and food safety.

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