Upton Sinclair’S Cry For Socialist Reform In His Novel, The Jungle Essay, Research Paper

Upton Sinclair’s Cry for Socialist Reform in his Novel, The Jungle

The Jungle is usually associated with the federal legislation it provoked. Americans were horrified to learn about the terrible sanitation under which their meat products were packed. They were even more horrified to learn that the labels listing the ingredients in tinned meat products were full of lies. The revelation that rotten and diseased meat was sold without a single consideration for public health infuriated the American public. They consumed meat containing the ground remains of poisoned rats and sometimes unfortunate workers who fell into the machinery for grinding meat and producing lard. Within months of The Jungle’s publication, the sale of meat products dropped dramatically. The public outcry of indignation led to the passage of the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act, less than a year after the novel’s publication (Harris 81).

However, contrary to what many people believe, Sinclair did not write The Jungle to incite the American government into regulating the sanitation of the meat packing industry. The details regarding the unsanitary and disgusting conditions in meat packing factories are background details of a much larger picture. Sinclair wrote his novel to provoke outrage over our country’s apathetic attitude toward the miserable working conditions of industrial wage labor by big business profiteers. He detailed the lack of sanitation in the factories in order to provoke sympathy and outrage for the impoverished factory workers. The germs and disease inside the meat packing establishments were indeed a public health concern, but it was far more of a concern for the workers. “The horrors in the packing plants that Upton described in the nauseating detail were almost endless. The hogs that arrived already dead of cholera and tubercular steers were processed and sold for human consumption” (Harris 73). Inevitably, Sinclair wrote his novel as an appeal to Socialism, because democracy failed to neither protect families and community values nor prevent the exploitation of wage labor from the hands of industry.

The novel follows Jurgis’s Lithuanian immigrant family into the disgusting tenements and meat packing factories of Chicago. There, they suffer the loss of all their dreams of success and freedom in America. They find themselves leashed to the grinding poverty and misery of the city slums despite all their best efforts. Sinclair’s purpose is to display the evils of capitalism as an economic system. “…had given to the thought to a struggle by the America’s working class to free themselves from their enslavement under capitalism, and to the creating of a new and classless society controlled collectively by all the people in their self interest” (Harris 57). Sinclair was bemused by the public reaction to his phenomenally successful novel. “He said that he had aimed for America’s heart, but had ended by hitting it in the stomach” (Harris 82).

The novel opens with a Lithuanian custom, the veselija, a wedding celebration. However, Sinclair emphasizes that the foreign custom demonstrates that the immigrants share a great many social values. The central values expressed in the veselija are family, community, and charity. According to custom, the community shares in the expense of the celebration and donates money to help the new couple start out in life. The celebration is an expression of commitment to community as well as to the institution of marriage. However, the young people are losing their commitment to the culture of the old world. They attempt to appear as assimilated as possible. In their assimilation to American culture, they become the primary predators at the celebration. They are the ones who largely avoid sharing in the cost of the veselija. Moreover, the saloon keepers take advantage of the celebrations as well. They lie and scheme to cheat the family out of as much money as possible

Sinclair wishes to inspire sympathy for the immigrant family by getting his readers to identify with their social values. The young con artists and the corrupt saloon-keepers have assimilated the brutal, predatory values of consumer capitalism. They represent dishonesty and thievery. They value their personal gains, their “profits,” above the social values of family, community, and charity. Wilson writes, “Capitalism is exposed as a system of both exploitation and of corruption: society as a whole is debased, degraded, infested” (367). Hence, Sinclair identifies capitalism as an attack on American values

Moreover, Jurgis and Ona’s family immigrates to America in search of the American dream, the advertisement by which America sells itself as the land of freedom and opportunity. The myth promises them that hard work and commitment to good social values will win them success (ie. “From Rags to Riches”). “…that one might dwell within the cave and gaze upon the shadows, provided only that once in his lifetime he could break his chains, and feel his wings, and behold the sun…” (Sinclair 18) However, they were mistaken. From the moment they arrive in the country, they fall prey to various greedy individuals who profit unfairly from their ignorance. Sinclair means to portray these events as a betrayal of the very values on which the American identity is based. Jurgis’s response to the con artists taking advantage of the veselija is, “I will work harder.” Again, Sinclair wishes to identify the immigrant laborer with the values of the American public. Jurgis calmly faces adversity, and he expresses a profound belief in the work ethic, a fundamental American value.

Sinclair details the dishonest practices of the meat- packing industry for several reasons. First, he portrays the practice of selling diseased and rotten meat in order to position big businessmen as corrupt liars. He details the lack of sanitation in the factories to garner sympathy for the wage laborers who must work there. They suffer diseases and illnesses constantly because of the working conditions in the factories. “There were the wool pluckers, whose hands went to pieces even sooner than the hands of the pickle men; for the pelts of sheep had to be painted with acid to loosen the wool, and then the pluckers had to pull out this wool with their bare hands, till the acid had eaten off their fingers” (Sinclair 87). The American public is sold rotten, diseased, and unclean meat under false pretenses. The immigrant laborers likewise buy the same food, but they also work in unclean, terrible conditions. Sinclair wants the reading public to identify with the immigrant laborer through their mutual victimization by the same enemy. The factory owners value their profits over the health of the workers and the public consumer.

Sinclair also makes clear that the few labor reform laws aimed at preventing the abusive labor practices are largely ineffective. The child labor laws forbidding children under the age of sixteen to work does nothing to keep children from being forced to work; the law is not aimed at abolishing capitalism, but at regulating it. Stanislovas enters the workforce at fourteen because he lies about his age. The very structure of capitalist economics, in Sinclair’s portrayal, makes such things necessary. Families belonging to the working poor cannot afford to keep their children in school. They need their children’s income to survive.

“ ‘I – will,’ sobbed Stanislovas. ‘It’s so – so col all the time. And last Sunday it snowed again – a deep, deep snow – and I couldn’t – couldn’t get to work.’

‘God!’ Jurgis half shouted, and he took a step forward toward the child. There was an old hatred between them because of the snow – ever since that dreadful morning when the boy had had his fingers frozen and Jurgis had had to beat him to send him to work” (Sinclair 169).

Throughout The Jungle, Sinclair offers evidence to support the belief that working from within capitalism is not effective.

Jurgis’s response to the adverse working conditions in Packingtown is likewise meant to demonstrate that he shares the same values with the American reading public. He is committed to his role as a family man, so he does not waste his hard earned money on alcohol despite the prevalence of alcohol in Packingtown. He chooses to meet adversity with self-reliance. He applies himself to learning English, and joins the union. He applies himself to the process of bettering his life through self- motivated action. Jurgis views the factories with undiluted optimism. In no way does he express unwillingness to work hard at becoming a part of his new country. Sinclair portrays him as utterly committed to the American values on which the American dream is based. Again, he wishes the reading public to identify with the immigrant laborer. Jokubas views the entire process with sarcasm because he knows better. He knows that the corrupt owners of the vast meat-packing business empire betray the values of the American dream in every way possible. Furthermore, Jurgis’s naturalization as an American citizen is tainted with corruption elections are rigged through an extensive vote buying scheme. Sinclair portrays the capitalism as a force that corrupts the very foundation of American political values. “Jurgis would find out these things for himself, if he stayed there long enough; it was the men who had to do all the dirty jobs, and so there was no deceiving them…he would soon find out his error – for nobody rose in Packingtown by doing good work…” (Sinclair 155). Members of the Chicago criminal underworld take advantage of ignorant, impoverished wage laborers to pervert the democratic process according to the wishes of big businessmen and their cronies.

Big capitalists often justified brutal labor practices with Social Darwinism. They twisted Darwin’s theory by stating that they were operating according to natural norms. Only the fittest and the strongest are meant to survive. They considered themselves the “fittest” of the human race because they were so successful. The wage laboring class was considered an inferior form of humanity. The racism and prejudice against immigrants helped this belief to gain power and influence in American culture. Sinclair portrays a Darwinian kind of fight for survival in Packingtown. However, being fit and strong has nothing to do with survival. The working conditions within capitalism ruin strong, healthy individuals as well as the crippled, the weak, and the old. Survival comes easily to those who are corrupt. “Sinclair presented his case not just in terms of exploitation but in metaphors of declension of corruption, and infestation: the worker’s degradation seems, in fact, to stem from the poisonous world they inhabit” (Wilson 369).

Sinclair accuses capitalism of making sustained commitment to the family nearly impossible. Ona has to return to work a mere week after giving birth. She does not have the opportunity to be a mother to her child. Jurgis’s long work hours prevent the development of a strong bond with his son. Their poverty, a result of capitalist economics, prevents them from being together as a family. Jonas disappears without warning. It is possible that he died while at work, but it is more likely that he simply abandoned the family. Within the capitalist system, families are a burden best avoided if a single individual wishes to survive (Dembo 360).

The constant anxiety of the wage laborer encourages tension in a family. Jurgis is forced to lie on his back for two months because of an accident. His employer refuses to take responsibility for his injury even though the accident is a direct result of unsafe working conditions. His frustration leads him to be violent to the children as well as everyone else. Moreover, he beats Stanislovas to force him to go to work. He has no other choice because the family cannot do without the boy’s wages. A crippled child is a burden in life as well as in death. Moreover, Kristoforas dies from eating the same poisoned meat his adult family members help pack in the factories. Having to work weakens the bonds that Vilimas and Nikalojus have with their family. They begin staying out at night, and the adults fear they will run away eventually. Sinclair clearly portrays capitalism as a threat to the integrity of the family.

Jurgis entrance in the underworld of crime demonstrates that merciless predation, thievery, and dishonesty are far better rewarded than commitment to fundamental American values. It also provides an inside look into the corruption of the justice system and the democratic political process. Jurgis makes far more money by mugging, rigging elections, and working as a scab than ever before. Sinclair positions capitalism as a threat to the American way.

It might seem odd that the meat packer would go to the expense of importing labor from all around the country to break the strike instead of settling. However, the practice of importing wage labor actually serves their interests in the end. The capitalists have the power and influence to withstand the temporary expense of a strike while the strikers are too poor to remain jobless for very long. The meat packers often entice people to immigrate to America with the false promises of high wages. The purpose of encouraging people to flock to the factory is to keep the supply of labor far above the actual demand for it. After the strike, the supply of scab workers will add to the total supply of labor. The effect of this practice is constant competition between wage laborers for the available jobs; “immigrants being displaced by the newer Slovak work force” (Wilson 367). It keeps the wage laborers divided and the wages low. In the end, capitalists benefit from institutionalized poverty.

Sinclair goes through great effort to show that immigrant wage laborers share the same values as the reading public. He details the characters’ commitment to the institution of the family, community, and charity. Moreover, he illustrates their faith in the American dream. He tries to make immigrants less “foreign” to the reading public so that they identify with the immigrant wage laborers’ suffering. Wilson states that “Sinclair presented his case not just in terms of exploitation but in metaphors of declension, corruption, and infestation: the worker’s degradation seems, in fact, to stem from the poisonous world they inhabit” (369).

After being laid off from a dangerous job in a steel plant, Jurgis becomes successively a tramp, the henchman for a crooked politician, a strikebreaker in the packing plant, and finally a bum. Having reached the bottom of the social pit, Jurgis enters the Socialist political meeting a defeated man. He has tried all forms of survival, but none of them offer the security and the peace of mind he seeks in “the capitalist jungle in which he has been hunted” (Rideout 350). He reacts to Socialism like a new, devout religious convert. Rideout compares Jurgis’ conversion to when the apostle “Paul saw the light on the road to Damacus, it should be noted that in The Jungle Sinclair carefully prepares such an outcome by conducting Jurgis through all the circles of the worker’s inferno and by attempting to show that no other savior except Socialism exists” (350). The speech voices the themes of his own experiences, and he feels that he is no longer alone. There are millions like him, and they have power.

“Those who lost in the struggle were generally exterminated; but now and then the had been known to save themselves by combination – which was a new and higher kind of strength. It was so that the gregarious animals had overcome the predaceous; it was so, in human history, that the people had mastered the kings. The workers were simply the citizens of industry, and the Socialist movement was the expression of their will to survive” (qtd. in Yoder 47).

Jurgis’ “conversion” comes after the failure of all other forms of amelioration for wage laborers’ suffering. Sinclair has gone to great lengths to illustrate the evils of capitalism. He offers Socialism as the solution to these problems. Jurgis’ encounter with unionism teaches him that he has “brothers in affliction, and allies. Their one chance for life was in union, and so the struggle became a kind of crusade (Sinclair 324).

The title of The Jungle finally becomes clear in all its forms. The world of the wage laborer is characterized by a Darwinian struggle for survival. Those who refuse to sacrifice their humanity, their integrity, and their individuality do not survive, much less succeed in this world. New arrivals enter into a jungle crammed with predators waiting to attack them at every turn. The structures of capitalism are a jungle of hidden nooks and crannies, each containing yet another dirty secret. Sinclair writes, “ ‘But my own duty is entirely different. I am bound to see that nothing but the truth appears; that this truth does in its entirety appear; and that it appears in such shape that practical results for good will follow…The vital matter is to remedy the evils with the least possible damage to innocent people’ ” (qtd. in Harris 87). Sinclair’s novel exposes the various levels of deception within the factories as well as the day to day details of the wage laborer’s life.

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