

Fiction Excerpt 1: Excerpts from *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair

Published in 1906, The Jungle brought awareness to the harsh working conditions in the American meat packing industry and the plight of immigrants. Upton Sinclair's descriptions shocked the public and led to new safety regulations and support for the Progressive movement.

Excerpt 1 (Chapter 8)

*Jurgis (/yer*giss/), an immigrant from Lithuania, works in a large meat packing plant, or "packer." Marija (/mah*ree*ya/), a member of Jurgis's extended family, works in a canning factory. However, during a slump in the economy (a time of reduced buying and selling), the canning factory closes. The big meat packing plants do not close, but there is less work.*

The men upon the killing beds [meatpacking plants where animals were butchered] felt also the effects of the slump which had turned Marija out; but they felt it in a different way. . . . The big packers did not turn their hands [workers] off and close down, like the canning factories; but they began to run for shorter and shorter hours. They had always required the men to be on the killing beds and ready for work at seven o'clock, although there was almost never any work to be done till the buyers out in the yards had gotten to work, and some cattle had come over the chutes. That would often be ten or eleven o'clock . . . [but now] they would perhaps not have a thing for their men to do till late in the afternoon. And so they would have to loaf around, in a place where the thermometer might be twenty degrees below zero! . . . Before the day was over they would become quite chilled through and exhausted, and, when the cattle finally came, so near frozen that to move was an agony. . . .

There were weeks at a time when Jurgis went home after such a day as this with not more than two hours' work to his credit—which meant about thirty-five cents. There were many days when the total was less than half an hour, and others when there was none at all. . . .

All this was bad; and yet it was not the worst. For after all the hard work a man did, he was paid for only part of it. Jurgis had once been among those who scoffed at the idea of these huge concerns [businesses] cheating; and so now he could appreciate the bitter irony of the fact that it was precisely their size which enabled them to do it with impunity [without any consequences]. One of the rules on the killing beds was that a man who was one minute late was docked an hour. . . . And on the other hand if he came ahead of time he got no pay for that—though often

the bosses would start up the gang ten or fifteen minutes before the whistle. And this same custom they carried over to the end of the day; they did not pay for any fraction of an hour—for “broken time.” A man might work full fifty minutes, but if there was no work to fill out the hour, there was no pay for him. . . .

One of the consequences of all these things was that Jurgis was no longer perplexed [surprised] when he heard men talk of fighting for their rights. He felt like fighting now himself. . . .

[He began to attend union meetings.] He had picked up a few words of English by this time, and friends would help him to understand. They were often very turbulent [wild] meetings, with half a dozen men declaiming [shouting] at once, in as many dialects of English; but the speakers were all desperately in earnest, and Jurgis was in earnest too, for he understood that a fight was on, and that it was his fight. . . . He discovered that he had brothers in affliction [with similar problems], and allies [friends]. Their one chance for life was in union, and so the struggle became a kind of crusade [fight for a just cause].

Excerpt 2 (Chapter 14)

Sinclair's graphic descriptions of the unsanitary conditions in meat packing plants shocked the public.

There was never the least attention paid to what was cut up for sausage; there would come all the way back from Europe old sausage that had been rejected, and that was moldy and white—it would be dosed with borax [a white powder made from boric acid, used in detergents, flame retardants, and disinfectants] and glycerine [a chemical compound used in foods and medicines], and dumped into the hoppers [containers for mixing], and made over again for home consumption. There would be meat that had tumbled out on the floor, in the dirt and sawdust, where the workers had tramped and spit. . . . 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 the dried dung of rats. These rats were nuisances, and the packers would put poisoned bread out for them; they would die, and then rats, bread, and meat would go into the hoppers [containers] 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 which a poisoned rat was a tidbit.

There was no place for the men to wash their hands before they ate their dinner, and so they made a practice of washing them in the water that was to be ladled into the sausage. . . . Some of it they would make into “smoked” sausage—but as the smoking took time, and was therefore expensive, they would call upon their chemistry department, and preserve it with borax and color it with gelatine to make it brown. . . .