

Jurgis Rudkus Learns the Horrors of Packingtown

In 1906, Upton Sinclair (1878–1968) published *The Jungle*, his classic exposé of working conditions in the meat-packing plants of Chicago. Sinclair was a “muckraker,” one of the Progressive-era writers who exposed social and political evils. The muckrakers themselves were reformers who hoped to produce social change, but their publishers also knew that these sensational revelations would find eager readers. Sinclair had hoped to outrage America with the working conditions in the meat-packing industry and in the process to make a case for socialism. He had gone to live with the immigrants who worked in the Chicago stockyards, so he could learn directly about the conditions in these plants. However, his accurate and revolting descriptions of the packing plants did not lead to public demands for better working conditions, but to the first legislation to ensure the purity of food. As Sinclair said about his novel, “I aimed at the public’s heart and by accident I hit it in the stomach.” In the following excerpt from *The Jungle*, the novel’s central character, a Slav immigrant named Jurgis Rudkus, learns about the horrors of “Packingtown” (the meatpacking district in Chicago). What do you find more disturbing, the conditions of the workers or the products that they make?

THEN ONE SUNDAY EVENING, Jurgis sat puffing his pipe by the kitchen stove, and talking with an old fellow whom Jonas had introduced, and who worked in the canning rooms at Durham’s [a meat-packing company]; and so Jurgis learned a few things about the great and only Durham-canned goods, which had become a national institution. They were regular alchemists at Durham’s; they

advertised a mushroom catsup, and the men who made it did not know what a mushroom looked like. They advertised "potted chicken,"—and it was like the boarding house soup of the comic papers, through which a chicken had walked with rubbers on. Perhaps they had a secret process for making chickens chemically—whó knows? said Jurgis's friend; the things that went into the mixture were tripe, and the fat of pork, and beef suet, and hearts of beef, and finally the waste ends of veal, when they had any. They put these up in several grades, and sold them at several prices; but the contents of the cans all came out of the same hopper. And then there was the "potted game" and "potted grouse" "potted ham" and "deviled ham"—de-vyled, as the men called it. "De-vyled" ham was made out of the waste ends of smoked beef that were too small to be sliced by the machines; and also tripe, dyed with chemicals so that it would not show white; and trimmings of hams and corned beef; and potatoes, skins and all; and finally the hard cartilaginous gullets of beef, after the tongues had been cut out. All this ingenious mixture was ground up and flavored with spice to make it taste like something. Anybody who could invent a new imitation had been sure of a fortune from old Durham, said Jurgis' informant; but it was hard to think of anything new in a place where so many sharp wits had been at work for so long; where men welcomed tuberculosis in the cattle they were feeding, because it made them fatten more quickly; and where they bought up all the rancid old butter left over in the grocery stores of a continent, and "oxidized" it by a forced-air process, to take away the odor, recharged it with skim-milk, and sold it in bricks in the cities! Up to a year or two ago it had been the custom to kill horses in the yards—ostensibly for fertilizer; but after long agitation the newspapers had been able to make the public realize that the horses were being canned. Now it was against the law to kill horses in Packingtown, and the law was really complied with—for the present at any rate. Any day, however, one might see sharp-horned and shaggy-haired creatures running with the sheep—and yet what a job you would have to get the public to believe that a good part of what it buys for lamb and mutton is really goat's flesh!

There was another interesting set of statistics that a person might have gathered in Packingtown—those of the various afflictions of the workers. When Jurgis had first inspected the packing-plants with the Szedvilas, he had marveled while he listened to the tales of all the things that were made out of the carcasses of animals, and of the

lesser industries that were maintained there; now he found that each one of these lesser industries was a separate little inferno, in its way as horrible as the killing-beds, the source and fountain of them all. The workers in each of them had their own particular diseases. And the wandering visitor might be skeptical about all the swindles, but he could not be skeptical about these, for the worker bore the evidence of them about on his own person — generally he had only to hold out his hand.

There were the men in the pickle-rooms, for instance, where old Antanas had gotten his death; scarce one of these that had not some spot of horror on his person. Let a man so much as scrape his finger pushing a truck in the pickle-rooms, and he might have a sore that would put him out of the world; all the joints in his fingers might be eaten by the acid, one by one. Of the butchers and floorsmen, the boners and beeftrimmers, and all those who used knives, you could scarcely find a person who had the use of his thumb; time and time again the base of it had been slashed, till it was a mere lump of flesh against which the man pressed the knife to hold it. The hands of these men would be criss-crossed with cuts, until you could no longer pretend to count them or to trace them. They would have no nails, — they had worn them off pulling hides; their knuckles were swollen so that their fingers spread out like a fan. There were men who worked in the cooking-rooms, in the midst of steam and sickening odors, by artificial light; in these rooms the germs of tuberculosis might live for two years, but the supply was renewed every hour. There were the beef-luggers, who carried two-hundred pound quarters into the refrigerator-cars; a fearful kind of work, that began at four o'clock in the morning, and that wore out the most powerful men in a few years. There were those who worked in the chilling-rooms and whose special disease was rheumatism; the time-limit that a man could work in the chilling-rooms was said to be five years. There were the wool pluckers, whose hands went to pieces even sooner than the hands of the pickle-men; for the pelts of the 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 their fingers off. There were those who made tins for the canned-meat; and their hands, too, were a maze of cuts, and each cut represented a chance for blood-poisoning. Some worked at the stamping machines, and it was very seldom that one could work there long at the pace that was set, and not give out and forget himself, and have part of his hand chopped

off. There were the “hoisters,” as they were called, whose task it was to press the lever which lifted the dead cattle off the floor. They ran along upon a rafter, peering down through the damp and the steam, and as old Durham’s architect had not built the killing-room for the convenience of the hoisters, at every few feet they would have to stoop under a beam, say four feet above the one they ran on; which got them in the habit of stooping, so that in a few years they would be walking like chimpanzees. Worst of any, however, were the fertilizer-men, and those who served in the cooking-rooms. These people could not be shown to the visitor at a hundred yards, and as for the other men, who worked in the tank-rooms full of steam, and in some of which there were open vats near the level of the floor, their particular trouble was that they fell into the vats and when they were fished out, there was never enough to be worth exhibiting,—sometimes they would be overlooked for days, till all but the bones of them had gone out to the world as Durham’s Pure Leaf Lard!

THINKING CRITICALLY

1. *Recognizing Values* Why do you think *The Jungle* was a bestseller? What might make people want to read about such an unpleasant subject?
2. *Making Inferences* What kind of people work at Durham’s? Why do they accept these working conditions?
3. *Linking Past and Present* Can you think of modern parallels to muckraking novels such as *The Jungle*? What type of television programs and print media fulfill this function today? What kinds of social problems do these contemporary muckrakers address?

WRITER’S PORTFOLIO

Write an essay describing what you think were the causes of the horrors of Packingtown. Was it unbridled capitalism? Was it prejudice against immigrants? Do you think socialism would have solved these problems as Sinclair believed?