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Social Deceit and Upton Sinclair's Jungle

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Abstract

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.

Keywords: industry, consumer, poverty, food, working class

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 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 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. 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. 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.

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 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. 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. 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 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. 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.

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