

Deconstructing *The Jungle*: Meat-Packing, Socialism, and Women

By the turn of the twentieth century hundreds of periodicals had been published in the United States and abroad detailing the unsanitary labor conditions and meagre wages of the industrialized working class. However, the text that transcended all of these in international recognition and lasting reputation was not a non-fiction investigative report, and instead was a novel. Upton Sinclair began writing *The Jungle* in 1905, publishing it as a novel in 1906¹. The plot's focus is a Lithuanian man and his family as they arrive in the Chicago stockyards with high expectations of opportunity and wealth; yet, they are met with the unsanitary and inhumane lifestyle of the American Progressive Era's working-class, which destroys and degrades them until the main male-character finds his place among the rising socialist movement. We know from his other socialist writings that *The Jungle* fit with Sinclair's political agenda as a socialist protest against the degradation of humanity, a degradation that he saw was caused by capitalist industrialization. The instant fame of *The Jungle* did not impart itself to Sinclair's socialist propaganda, but was instead a product of its historical moment. The political unrest surrounding the exposé and its multidimensional audience propelled *The Jungle* to enter the literary canon and maintain its presence there for decades to come. As *The Jungle* soared in popularity Sinclair's socialist message was pushed further and further to the margins of the text's publically perceived purpose: the exposure of the meatpacking industry. Yet, drilling down into Sinclair's socialist rhetoric there is a glaring misrepresentation and absence there as well. Where are the women? Certainly Sinclair allowed for a few plot-driven female characters, but the range of their

¹ *The Jungle* was first published as a serial in *The Appeal to Reason* between February 25 and December 16, 1905, and then republished twice in 1906 by Sinclair (with support of his readers) and Doubleday, Page, and Company. See: Upton Sinclair, "The Jungle: A Story of Chicago," *NYU's Undercover Reporting Deception for Journalism's Sake: A Database*, Accessed March 8, 2016, <http://dlib.nyu.edu/undercover/jungle-story-chicago-upton-sinclair-appeal-reason>. See also: William A. Bloodworth Jr. *Upton Sinclair* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), 57.

societal roles is slanted in a blatant regard for the male characters instead. The world was fixated on the prospect of tainted meat, Sinclair was absorbed in his political crusade for socialism, and women were left lost in *The Jungle*.

To say that *The Jungle* was published at just the right moment in history is an understatement. Much of its national and international acclaim can be attributed to its political moment at the turn of the twentieth century. The stockyard setting and the increased public awareness of political and capitalist corruption helped to thrust *The Jungle* into its lasting place in history. Much of *The Jungle*'s increased popularity can be credited to President Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt was a staunch opponent to the big trusts of the Progressive Era. After hearing of Sinclair's claims and following the almost-instant international concerns surrounding the novel, Roosevelt called for an investigation of *The Jungle*'s statements. In March of 1906, Roosevelt sent a preliminary team of investigators from the Department of Agriculture to begin an investigation of Sinclair's claims. Those reports came back declaring *The Jungle* as a pure work of fiction full of exaggerations and misrepresentations; however, Roosevelt, with pressure from Sinclair and thousands of received letters, did not trust that first investigation.² He invited Sinclair to lead a small, discrete group of investigators through the Chicago stockyards to give evidence of the novel's claims. Sinclair sent for a confidante from his investigations, Ms. Ella Reeve, to direct the President's investigators to the similar contacts he had encountered during his original investigation.³ Reeve helped reveal the disturbing realities of the Chicago meat industry to the investigators, and Roosevelt was served a report of vile and disgusting conditions that ended the questioning of Sinclair's assertions.

² Anthony Arthur. *Radical Innocent: Upton Sinclair*. First Edition, (New York: Random House, 2006), 74-75.

³ Anthony Arthur, 75-77.

The report sat on the President's desk till the end of May.⁴ Finally on June 30th 1906 Roosevelt took action and passed the Pure Food and Drug Act along with its Meat Inspection Amendment. Both pieces of legislature were measures to protect the public health as well as means of regulation on private business. *The Jungle* became the known force behind Roosevelt's investigations, and the building-blocks of regulatory legislation. The novel's spark of public concern around the increasingly alarming Beef Trust rooted the book's political moment in history.

It is Sinclair's one-track socialist ideology to defeat capitalism that marginalized women's roles in industrial labor and labor reform and displaced the specific conditions experienced by Chicago's laborers outside of the stockyards. Jacques Derrida, in "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," describes his theory of deconstruction as a process of identifying structural center(s) of a work or discourse and then observing what is left marginalized and unsaid due to that centralized focus.⁵ On a macro level the emphasis on *The Jungle* as the exposé or as one of the best pieces of muckraking literature marginalizes the writings of other muckrakers that exposed reality of the conditions of the Progressive Era through non-fiction. By canonizing Sinclair's novel as the muckraking literature for students to read over the real accounts of other exposés we lose touch with the true reality of the social injustices of this time. In centralizing the image of a muckraker on Sinclair we have lost sight in history of those exposés that provided the more real experience of being a laborer during this

⁴ Arthur discusses Roosevelt's reservations to publish the complete report that not only supported Sinclair's claims, but offered a further point of reality as an official government report. Roosevelt worried that allowing the report to appear as it stood would cause a worsening international opinion of American meat that would plummet the economic reliance on international meat sales. Anthony Arthur, 79-81.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" in *Global Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Richard J. Lane, 94-106. New York: Routledge, 2013.

time. Featuring fictional characters and fictional depictions of places instead of real people, places, and stories dissociates the narrative from the conditions affecting actual people.

In applying deconstruction to *The Jungle* two centers emerge: the faults of the meat-packing industry and Sinclair's socialism. These centers displace realities to the margins and what Sinclair left out becomes increasingly evident. Sinclair's choice to set the novel in the stockyard of Chicago ultimately disregarded the conditions of laborers in other industries. The novel pays no mind to the people toiling their lives away in non-stockyard industries. Once Jurgis gets out of the stockyards he experiences a blissful freedom in the countryside, "He was a free man now, a buccaneer. The old wanderlust had got into his blood, the joy of the unbound life, the joy of seeking, of hoping without limit."⁶ This binary portrayal of Chicago, either stockyard or country, leaves out the possibilities to discuss the inhumane conditions of other industries, outside of the stockyards, that put Chicago on the map as an industrialized city.

However, the most striking marginalization in *The Jungle* is the limited perspective of women's roles in society. I applied a distant reading of the novel, using regular expression matching on the Project Gutenberg edition to locate every instance of male-related words ("gentleman," "man," "men", male pronouns) as well as every instance of clearly female-related words ("woman," "women", "lady", female pronouns). The male references occurred 966 times in comparison to 290 female references, a ratio of 1:3.⁷ Certainly Sinclair allowed for a few main characters in the novel to be women; however, they represent a very narrow perspective of women in comparison to the complexity of the male roles in society that Sinclair characterized. He represents male characters as politicians, husbands, laborers, company owners,

⁶ Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*, Edited by Cynthia Brantley Johnson and Anna Maria Hong, Enriched Classics (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2004), 265.

⁷ The XML markup and regular expression matching was completed on this version of the text: Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 2006, <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/140>.

philanthropists, wealthy, poor, healthy, and sick and each of those roles in some way compliments his socialist agenda. In stark contrast, the women characters can all be categorized under a single umbrella of working-class women, who each fall to illness, death, and/or prostitution. None of the complex societal roles of women are represented. The distinct class differences of women and the complex domestic roles women characteristically occupied during the Progressive Era are nonexistent in *The Jungle*. A centering of the novel on the male laborer's plight and how socialism offers men the opportunity to escape capitalistic slavery marginalizes women's labor during this time. In her response to Derrida's deconstruction theory and French Feminism, Mary Poovey asserts, "Real historical women have been (and are) oppressed, and the ways and means of that oppression need to be analyzed and fought. But at the same time, we need to be ready to abandon the binary thinking that has stabilized women as a group that could be collectively (although not uniformly) oppressed."⁸ In past analyses of women's representation in *The Jungle*, including Scott Derrick's "What a beating feels like: authorship, dissolution, and masculinity in Sinclair's *The Jungle*," the novel's female characters are analyzed with a heavy emphasis on their biological opposition to men.⁹ Poovey suggests that in order to use deconstruction to emphasize feminine oppression the focus from the biological difference with men needs to be shifted instead to the roles women uphold outside of what is purely due to their sex. Poovey's method of feminine deconstruction helps illuminate the societal roles that have been marginalized in *The Jungle* by Sinclair's socialist agenda.

⁸ Mary Poovey, "Feminism and Deconstruction" in *Global Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Richard J. Lane (New York: Routledge, 2013), 114-115.

⁹ Derrick deems *The Jungle* as a misogynist text based on his observations of the male fear of feminine authority and their distaste for the reproductive nature of women. Scott Derrick, "What a Beating Feels like: Authorship, Dissolution, and Masculinity in Sinclair's *The Jungle*," *Studies in American Fiction* 23, no. 1 (1995).

Sinclair uses the female characters as vehicles for his socialist goal and pushes the reality of women's roles in society to the margins of the novel. This is especially seen in regards to the reality of women's involvement in the labor movement versus Sinclair's representation.

He turned a little, carefully, so that he could see her better; then he began to watch her, fascinated. She had apparently forgotten all about him, and was looking toward the platform. A man was speaking there--Jurgis heard his voice vaguely; but all his thoughts were for this woman's face. A feeling of alarm stole over him as he stared at her. It made his flesh creep... There was a faint quivering of her nostrils; and now and then she would moisten her lips with feverish haste. Her bosom rose and fell as she breathed, and her excitement seemed to mount higher and higher, and then to sink away again, like a boat tossing upon ocean surges. What was it? What was the matter? It must be something that the man was saying, up there on the platform. What sort of a man was he? And what sort of thing was this, anyhow? -- So all at once it occurred to Jurgis to look at the speaker. It was like coming suddenly upon some wild sight of nature--a mountain forest lashed by a tempest, a ship tossed about upon a stormy sea. Jurgis had an unpleasant sensation, a sense of confusion, of disorder, of wild and meaningless uproar.¹⁰

In this passage we see Sinclair use the sexual appeal of a woman to literally turn Jurgis on to socialism, but nothing else. A number of other scenes with women involved are used prior to Jurgis's introduction to socialism to set him up as a victim of industrialization without any real emphasis on the plights of the actual women in the scenes. In a scene soon after Jurgis is released from jail Ona (his wife) dies during child birth. The scene develops in a relatively short couple of pages and the reader gets practically nothing of the real experience had by Ona on her death bed. All we are shown are Jurgis's anguish and his horrified thoughts as he awaits the midwife's news emphasizing Jurgis's victim status. In another scene Jurgis discovers his cousin-in-law has been living in a brothel to support the family he abandoned. Her confession to a loss of morals and drug addiction is over in just a few short sentences before Jurgis resolves to bury his mind in socialism to be rid of the family shame.

The text also provides nothing on women's labor and the efforts of women's labor reform. What makes this most evident is the plot's setting in Chicago: home of the Hull House. As Chicago's first and the nation's most influential settlement house, the Hull House was

¹⁰ Upton Sinclair, *Enriched Classics*, 366.

established by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr in Chicago on September 18, 1889. Known to offer programs that provided for especially working-class women and children, the reputation of the Hull House has been a long-standing association made with Chicago's labor reform movement. Yet in *The Jungle* there is no mention of the Hull House, the national women's labor movement is nonexistent, and an overall absence of strong women labor. Essentially the women, especially those of Chicago, are lost in *The Jungle*.

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