

The Effect of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* in the Progressive Era

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Abstract

At the turn of the twentieth century, a group of American writers and journalists called the ‘muckrakers’ sought to expose the problems and growing inequalities in society. The muckraker with arguably the greatest impact was Upton Sinclair, whose influential novel, *The Jungle*, helped bring about extensive changes in food and drug regulation in the U.S. This paper will examine the influence of *The Jungle* and how the firestorm it created would lead to the passage of the Federal Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906.

Keywords: American literature, United States history, *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair, Progressive Era

The time from the end of the Civil War through the dawn of the twentieth century was a period of incredible growth in the United States. Industrial output increased by nearly six hundred percent, and the U.S. became the largest economy in the world.¹ From 1870-1900, the population doubled to seventy-six million, and immigrants flooded American shores searching for opportunity and a fresh start. This age was symbolized by wealthy industrial titans such as John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and J.P. Morgan.

Yet despite the impressive growth, this era is often backhandedly referred to as America’s ‘Gilded Age.’ This moniker comes from the title of an 1873 novel penned by Mark Twain. ‘Gilded’ means something is covered with a thin layer of gold, with the insinuation being that although the time appeared golden, it was merely a shiny veneer hiding the corruption, greed, and inequalities that lay beneath. These inequalities can be demonstrated by the fact that in 1890, “the wealthiest 1% of

¹ O'Donnell, Edward. “Are We Living in the Gilded Age 2.0?” *The History Channel*. January 31, 2019. <https://www.history.com/news/second-gilded-age-income-inequality>. Accessed October 12, 2022. Para. 5.

American families owned 51% of the country's real and personal property, while the 44% at the bottom owned 1.2%.”² During this time, about 40% of industrial workers had earnings below the poverty line.³

As the negative, baser aspects of the Gilded Age became more apparent, a group of high-minded journalists sought to expose the injustices and disparities in society and advocate for change. These writers became known as ‘muckrakers,’ referring to their propensity to sift through the muck or manure of society in search of wrongdoing. As the twentieth century dawned, these muckrakers would lead the vanguard for change in what would later become known as the Progressive Era.

This paper will focus on Upton Sinclair, the muckraker who arguably had the most immediate, and the most lasting, impact during the Progressive Era. It will show how Sinclair's seminal work, *The Jungle*, was instrumental in shining a light on the horrendous conditions in the country's meatpacking industry and was a catalyst for the passage of both the Federal Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906.

Upton Sinclair was born in Baltimore in 1878. His father had come from an affluent Virginia family who had seen its wealth decimated by the Civil War. The elder Sinclair was a salesman and alcoholic, and young Upton grew up under frequently impoverished conditions.

Sinclair's mother, on the other hand, was very strict and religious. Her parents were well-to-do, and Upton visited them often during his childhood. During this upbringing, Sinclair saw firsthand the stark contrast between wealth and poverty, and this experience would indelibly shape his thoughts and writings.

A bright student and a voracious reader, Sinclair entered the City College of New York at the young age of thirteen, and upon graduating, studied law at Columbia University. But rather than practicing law, the young man instead sought to become a writer.

Sinclair's interest in a more equitable distribution of wealth drew him to socialism. In 1904, he started writing for the socialist newspaper, *Appeal to Reason*. Soon after, he traveled to Chicago to gather material for a story about a recent meatpackers' strike. Sinclair interviewed the workers and their families, and even toiled in the meatpacking plants himself to get an idea of the appalling conditions the employees faced. This experience would become the basis and setting for *The Jungle*, which is one of the most well-known books in American literature.

The Jungle was published in book form in 1906, after first running as a series

² See no. 1. Para. 11.

³ “How Gilded Age Corruption Led to the Progressive Era.” *The History Channel*. <https://www.history.com/news/gilded-age-progressive-era-reforms>. Accessed October 12, 2022. Para. 4.

in *Appeal to Reason*. *The Jungle* featured the fictional protagonist, Jurgis Rudkus, who had recently immigrated with his family to Chicago from Lithuania. At the beginning of the novel, Jurgis was young, strong, and confident of success in the sprawling Chicago stockyards. He imagined himself rising through the ranks through hard work and living out the 'American dream' of providing a better life for his family. Standing out with his sturdy physique, he was chosen almost immediately for work from amongst the "hungry mob" of hopefuls that clamored daily at the gates of the great packing plants.⁴ However, Jurgis soon found that:

"nobody rose in Packingtown by doing good work. You could lay that down for a rule — if you met a man who was rising in Packingtown, you met a knave...the man who told tales and spied upon his fellows would rise; but the man who minded his own business and did his work — why, they would 'speed him up' till they had worn him out, and then they would throw him into the gutter."⁵

Over the course of the novel, a series of tragedies befell Jurgis and his family that would have made the Biblical Job blush. Jurgis' father, Antanas, died due to illness over the first winter after working in horrendous conditions in an unheated basement of the factory. Jurgis' young wife, Ona, was repeatedly raped by her boss and later she and her baby died during the birth of her second child. The family lost their home due to their inability to fulfill the unreasonable contract provisions set out by their unscrupulous real estate agents. Ona's stepmother, Elzbieta, became a beggar in an effort to support her young children. The children were unable to remain in school and were forced to find menial work to scrape together pennies to help feed the family. Elzbieta's eldest son, Stanislovas, got locked inside his company one night and was set upon and eaten by rats. Jurgis' cousin, Marija, became a prostitute to earn money to also help support the family. Jurgis' first-born child, Antanas, died while still a toddler after falling on the side of the street and drowning in mud.

Jurgis is temporarily broken by this never-ending string of calamities, and after Ona and young Antanas' death, he abandoned the rest of the family for a time. In the end, Jurgis became dedicated to socialism as a movement that he hoped would raise the status of poor, mistreated workers in the world.

Sinclair's primary motivation in writing *The Jungle* was to shock the American public and awaken them to the horrors and injustices faced by large numbers of the working poor. He hoped a public outcry would lead to new laws and

⁴ Sinclair, Upton. *The Jungle* (Dover Thrift Editions). Dover Publications. Kindle Edition. Pg. 17.

⁵ See no. 4. Pg. 55.

a socialist system that would safeguard workers who were often struggling for survival with no safety net when misfortune fell.

The public did raise an outcry after reading *The Jungle*. But to Sinclair's dismay, it was not over the plight of the laborers, but instead over the quality of the meat that Americans were consuming. Although Sinclair's lurid details of the filthy conditions in the meatpacking plants constituted only a small percentage of the book, they were the best-remembered part of the novel. Sinclair told how the meat from animals with diseases like cholera and tuberculosis was routinely used despite being condemned by inspectors. He described how rotten meat was ground up into sausage or treated with chemicals to give it "any color and any flavor and any odor they chose" before then being shipped to the markets.⁶ It was this kind of 'embalmed' meat that was said to be used in soldiers rations during the Spanish-American War of 1898, and "killed several times as many United States soldiers as all the bullets of the Spaniards."⁷ And in one of the most powerful and damning passages, he depicted how factory meat was:

"doused with borax and glycerine, and dumped into the hoppers, 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 uncounted billions of consumption germs. 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 together."⁸

The public reacted with shock and outrage towards the allegations made about the meat-packing industry. One person disgusted by what he read was President Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt was no fan of Sinclair's socialist politics, and he had a mixed view of muckrakers in general. In fact, it was Roosevelt who coined the term in a speech given on April 14, 1906, just weeks after *The Jungle* had been published.⁹ In this speech, Roosevelt alluded to the Man with the Muck Rake, a character in John Bunyan's novel, *Pilgrim's Progress*. The Man with the Muck Rake spent all his time looking down and scraping at the mud on the ground, rather than looking up towards heaven and engaging in more spiritual or divine

⁶ See no. 4. Pg. 127.

⁷ See no. 4. Pg. 91.

⁸ See no. 4. Pg. 128.

⁹ Gaughan, Anthony. "Harvey Wiley, Theodore Roosevelt, and the Federal Regulation of Food and Drugs." *LEDA at Harvard Law School*. Winter 2004. <https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/8852144/Gaughan.html>. Accessed December 6, 2022. Para. 32.

pursuits. He saw writers or journalists who used a muck-rake to sift through the slime and ills of society to be “the most needed of all the services that can be performed,” but that someone who focused only on the negative would become not a help, but a detriment to society.¹⁰

But while Roosevelt may have been ambivalent about muckraking journalism, he was staunchly against big business run amok. In addition, having famously fought in Cuba during the Spanish-American War, he was keenly aware of the meat embalming scandal, saying that he would have rather “eaten his old hat” than the army beef.¹¹

Efforts to rein in the abuses of the meatpackers were nothing new. During the late 1800s, laws had been passed regulating the industry, and many other bills had been introduced into Congress, only to die quiet deaths due to the packers’ lobbying activities. The laws that existed before *The Jungle*’s publication were toothless and ineffective. But the impact Sinclair’s novel had on the public, combined with Roosevelt’s energy and zeal, meant that this time would be different.

Sinclair and Roosevelt began a written correspondence, and Roosevelt appointed Labor Commissioner James Neill and social worker James Reynolds to go to Chicago and investigate the claims Sinclair had made. In an April 10, 1906, letter to the president, Sinclair stated his reservations with Roosevelt’s plan, saying that the main meatpacking firms knew of Neill and Reynolds’ mission, and would therefore temporarily clean up their act to deceive the investigators.¹² But the president insisted, and the investigation commenced. Because of the often-sensationalized prose in *The Jungle*, many thought Sinclair had exaggerated the situation and abuses in Packingtown. But despite the meatpackers’ prior knowledge of the probe, Neill and Reynolds were horrified to confirm that almost everything Sinclair had written was accurate.

The investigators’ write-up of their findings, called the Neill-Reynolds Report, added fuel to the fire ignited by *The Jungle*. In the report, they described how workers relieved themselves in filthy privies and then often had no way to wash their hands afterwards. The employees would return to work and “plunge their

¹⁰ “Theodore Roosevelt, ‘Address of President Roosevelt at the Laying of the Corner Stone of the Office Building of the House of Representatives (The Man with the Muck-Rake)’ April 14, 1906.” *Voices of Democracy*. <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/theodore-roosevelt-the-man-with-the-muck-rake-speech-text/>. Accessed December 22, 2022. Para. 3.

¹¹ “Theodore Roosevelt: Warrior for Public Justice.” *Bill of Rights Institute*. <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/activities/theodore-roosevelt-warrior-for-public-justice-handout-a-narrative>. Accessed January 1, 2023. Para. 5.

¹² “Correspondence between Theodore Roosevelt and Upton Sinclair (1906).” *W.W. Norton & Company Studyspace*. <https://www.norton.com/college/history/fooner2/contents/ch18/documents05.asp>. Accessed October 22, 2022. April 10, 1906, letter: Para. 3.

unwashed hands into the meat” that would eventually be sold to consumers.¹³ They relayed an incident where a dead hog had fallen and slid into one of these dirty privies and was simply picked up and hung with the others with no attempt to even clean it. The investigators saw “meat shoveled from filthy wooden floors, piled on tables rarely washed, pushed from room to room in rotten box carts, in all of which processes it was in the way of gathering dirt, splinters, floor filth, and the expectoration of tuberculous and other diseased workers.”¹⁴ During much of the operation, there were no inspectors present, even though, in the end, each product was given a label saying that its quality was guaranteed by the U.S. government. There was no way to even be sure of how old a product was. Neill and Reynolds found that at least two companies had removed the original labels from unsold canned goods and gave them new ones, even though the products’ expiration dates had long since passed. In addition, workers were found to be toiling at a pace and in conditions that was noticeably detrimental to their health.

The President, in his letter to Congress introducing the Neill-Reynolds Report, flatly stated that “the conditions shown by even the short inspection to exist in the Chicago stockyards are revolting. It is imperatively necessary in the interest of health and of decency that they should be radically changed. Under the existing law it is wholly impossible to secure satisfactory results.”¹⁵ Others agreed that the current system and laws were completely inadequate for proper oversight of the industry. For example, Dr. William Jaques, who had overseen Chicago’s meat inspection from 1902-1903, estimated that an expert physician could realistically and properly inspect fifty animals per day at the most. He also guessed that the government had at its disposal only about fifty of these expert physicians. If there were fifty thousand animals killed each day in Chicago’s stockyards, that would come to about one hundred inspections an hour, or about two each minute.¹⁶ In Dr. Jaques’ view, the current system was not only inadequate, it was veritably worthless.

Sinclair wanted Roosevelt to immediately release the Neill-Reynolds Report to the public. But the President was initially hesitant to do so. He feared that the report would hurt not only the wealthy meatpackers, but also blameless farmers

¹³ Report on Conditions in the Chicago Stock Yards; 1905; Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, Record Group 233. <https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/report-on-conditions-in-the-chicago-stock-yards>. Accessed November 30, 2022. Neill and Reynolds Report: Pg. 4.

¹⁴ See no. 13. Neill and Reynolds Report: Pg. 8.

¹⁵ See no. 13. Roosevelt Introduction Letter: Pg. 1.

¹⁶ Letter from Upton Sinclair to President Theodore Roosevelt; 3/10/1906; Letters Received, 1893 - 1906; Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, Record Group 16; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD. <https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/sinclair-roosevelt>. Accessed December 3, 2022. Pg. 4.

and ranchers who provided meat to the industry.¹⁷ Premature circulation of the report could lead to a decrease in the demand for U.S. meat both domestically and internationally.

Instead, Roosevelt urged passage of the Beveridge Amendment, a reform bill introduced by Indiana Senator Albert Beveridge that demanded stricter meat inspection, the cost of which would be paid for by the packers themselves. The President threatened that if Congress did not pass the Beveridge Amendment, he would make the Neill-Reynolds Report public.

In the meantime, the meatpacking moguls were engaging in damage control to assuage the public's anger. For example, J. Ogden Armour, president of Armour & Company, published a series of articles in the *Saturday Evening Post* in the spring of 1906, defending his company's practices and inviting consumers to visit and inspect any of the Armour & Company facilities. He tried to convince readers that "not a cranny or crevice is left in which dust might gather or a germ hide from the frequent cleansings."¹⁸ Armour swore that "not one atom of any condemned animal or carcass finds its way, directly or indirectly...into any food product."¹⁹

While the Beveridge Amendment passed in the Senate, the meatpackers' lobbyists and supporters in the House of Representatives did everything they could to water down the bill and remove some of its most important provisions. In response, an incensed Roosevelt made good with his threat and released the Neill-Reynolds Report to the press.

The fresh wave of public and media fury generated by the report proved too much for the meatpackers to weather. The Beveridge Amendment was finally passed in the House and became known as the Federal Meat Inspection Act. It was signed into law by Roosevelt on June 30, 1906. The new law required inspection before, during, and after animals were slaughtered and then throughout the entire manufacturing process. It also set strict guidelines for proper sanitation and the accurate labeling of meat products.²⁰ After passage of the act, 1,300 new inspectors were hired, and meat-testing labs were set up around the country.²¹

In conjunction with the Federal Meat Inspection Act, the Pure Food and Drug

¹⁷ See no. 12. May 29, 1906, letter: Para. 1.

¹⁸ Armour, J. Ogden. "The Packers and the People." *The Saturday Evening Post*. March 10, 1906, pg. 6. <https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/flipbooks/issues/19060310/>. Accessed January 1, 2023.

¹⁹ See no. 18.

²⁰ "Introduction and Historical Review of Meat Inspection." *National Library of Medicine: National Center for Biotechnology Information*. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK235649/>. Accessed December 27, 2022. Para. 12.

²¹ Kosnar, Stephen. "Welcome to *The Jungle*: The Story of Adopting Two Food Safety Laws." *Hektoen International: A Journal of Medical Humanities*. <https://hekint.org/2019/05/02/welcome-to-the-jungle-the-story-of-adopting-two-food-safety-laws/>. Accessed November 22, 2022. Para. 19.

Act was also signed by Roosevelt on the same day. This law made it illegal to sell or manufacture any food or medicine that was mislabeled or contained potentially poisonous or harmful ingredients.²² This law would have far-reaching effects in regulating not only food products, but also patent medicines, and would lead to the birth of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Sinclair, himself, was ultimately disappointed by the outcome of the furor his novel had caused. For one, as a staunch socialist, Sinclair had wanted the meatpacking industry to become publicly owned rather than simply government regulated.²³ Furthermore, Sinclair's main purpose in writing *The Jungle* had been to expose and remedy the terrible conditions that many of the workers in the era faced. It is true that the meatpackers redressed some of these problems. Even before the final passage of the Federal Meat Inspection Act, Roosevelt was told that the main Chicago meatpacking firms were putting in new toilets, showers, and dressing rooms for their workers.²⁴ Once the new law was passed, companies were then forced to adhere to new standards of cleanliness that would not only help ensure the quality of their food products, but also benefit their workers. But for Sinclair, the changes didn't go nearly far enough. Sinclair was dismayed that the public was more outraged by the quality of their meat than in the plight of the workers, lamenting, "I aimed at the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach."²⁵

Sinclair would later try his hand in politics, twice running unsuccessfully for Congress in the 1920s, and then losing three times in the race for governor of California in the 1920s and 30s. He would write more than ninety books during his lifetime, although none more famous than *The Jungle*. But it was this signature work that ignited the fire and directly led to much-needed reform in the U.S. food and drug industry. Due to the power and significance of *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair had the most immediate, and arguably the most lasting, impact of all the muckrakers of the Progressive Era.

²² An Act of June 30, 1906, Public Law 59-384, 34 STAT 768, for Preventing the Manufacture, Sale, or Transportation of Adulterated or Misbranded or Poisonous or Deleterious Foods, Drugs, Medicines, and Liquors, and for Regulating Traffic Therein, and for; 6/30/1906; Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, 1789 - 2011; General Records of the United States Government, Record Group 11; National Archives Building, Washington, DC. <https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/pure-food-and-drug-act>. Accessed December 3, 2022. Para. 2.

²³ "Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*: Muckraking the Meat-Packing Industry." *Constitutional Rights Foundation*. Fall 2008 (Volume 24, Number 1). <https://www.crf-usa.org/bill-of-rights-in-action/bria-24-1-b-upton-sinclair-the-jungle-muckraking-the-meat-packing-industry.html>. Accessed November 13, 2022. Para. 40.

²⁴ See no. 9. Para. 44.

²⁵ See no. 23. Para. 33.

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