

DISILLUSIONMENT, SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISPARITIES, AND THE IMMIGRANT WORKER IN UPTON SINCLAIR'S *THE JUNGLE*.

Emmanuel Ngor NDIAYE

Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar, Sénégal

emmangor54@gmail.com / emmanuelngor.ndiaye@ucad.edu.sn

Abstract

The Jungle (1906) is a seminal work of American literary naturalism that explicitly exposes the harsh realities of immigrant workers. Thus, through the perspective of immigrant labour embodied by the Rudkus family, Sinclair provides a critique of early 20th-American capitalism. This paper explores three interrelated themes in The Jungle namely disillusionment, socio-economic disparities, and the immigrant's worker experience. In this regard, by portraying how political corruption, systemic exploitation, and wage slavery trap immigrants, Sinclair exposes the myth of the American Dream. In the first section of this paper, the relationship between the immigrant worker and the myth of the American Dream is the central theme. As discussed in this section, the American Dream is an ideology that lures immigrant workers and this is what makes it a myth rather than a reality. With reference to the second section of this paper, the analysis centers on the immigrant experience and socio-economic disparities to unveil the obstacles that workers in the meat-processing industry encountered in their quest for prosperity. Considering all the elements explored in the first and second sections, the third one is about the political message of Sinclair's novel and its critique against capitalism. In this respect, by analyzing the living and working conditions of immigrants as depicted by Sinclair, this paper outlines how the novel remains an awareness raising work and how it helped in calling the attention of American authorities through the passage of federal legislations.

Key words: *American dream, capitalism, disillusionment, immigration, socialism*

Résumé

The Jungle (1906) est une œuvre fondamentale du naturalisme littéraire américain qui expose explicitement les dures réalités des travailleurs immigrants. Ainsi, à travers la perspective du travail immigré incarnée par la famille Rudkus, Sinclair offre une critique du capitalisme américain du début du 20^e siècle. Cet article explore trois thèmes interconnectés dans The Jungle, à savoir la désillusion, les disparités socio-économiques et l'expérience des travailleurs immigrants. À cet égard, en montrant comment la corruption politique, l'exploitation systémique et l'esclavage salarial piègent les immigrants, Sinclair dévoile le mythe du rêve américain. Dans la première partie de cet article, la relation entre le travailleur immigrant et le mythe du rêve américain est le thème central. Comme discuté dans cette section, le rêve américain est une idéologie qui attire les travailleurs immigrants et c'est ce qui en fait un mythe plutôt qu'une réalité. S'agissant de la deuxième partie de ce document, l'analyse se concentre sur l'expérience des immigrants et les disparités socio-économiques pour révéler les obstacles que les travailleurs de l'industrie de la transformation de la viande ont rencontrés dans leur quête de prospérité. En prenant en compte tous les éléments explorés dans les première et deuxième parties, la troisième partie concerne le

message politique du roman de Sinclair et sa critique du capitalisme. À cet égard, en analysant les conditions de vie et de travail des immigrants telles que décrites par Sinclair, ce document montre comment le roman reste une œuvre de sensibilisation et comment il a contribué à attirer l'attention des autorités américaines à travers l'adoption de lois fédérales.

Mots clés : *capitalisme, désillusion, immigration, rêve américain, socialisme*

Introduction

Upton Sinclair, being a socialist and investigative journalist, is the author of the groundbreaking novel *The Jungle*, published in 1906 during the Progressive Era. That period marked the birth of social, political, and economic reforms that aimed to tackle the challenges of American industrialization, urbanization, and inequalities. That is in this context that Sinclair, after spending several months in Chicago's meat packing industry, has written *The Jungle* which is, for some critics, a protest and awakening novel that exposes the poor working conditions of immigrants in the meatpacking industry.

As an investigative journalist, Sinclair uses naturalist devices to present the story of a Lithuanian immigrant family led by Jurgis Rudkus, the protagonist of the novel. Like many immigrants, Jurgis and his family are lured by the myth of the American Dream. Nonetheless, irrespective of his hope, Jurgis will realize that the American Dream is far from being a reality but rather a myth on account of the harsh working conditions, corruption, and the socio-economic disparities that immigrant workers go through.

For many immigrants, America is a land of acceptance and opportunity but through his novel, Sinclair points out that it is a place where prejudice and exploitation are among the many hardships that workers experience. To put it differently, *The Jungle* reveals that society is structured in a way that the strongest people are rewarded, while inferior ones are exploited and kept down and such a situation makes them almost inexistent. The title of the novel illustrates this perspective provided that it draws attention to social Darwinism to justify the power of capitalists who abuse the working class.

Sinclair's goal in writing *The Jungle* was therefore to draw attention to the misery of the working class in a capitalist economy. In *Work and Community in The Jungle: Chicago's Packinghouse Workers 1894-1922* (1987), James R. Barrett calls into question this monopoly of capitalism in the following terms: "For millions of American farmers, industrial workers, and

professional reformers throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the meat packing industry and its corporate giants symbolized the growth of monopoly capitalism in the United States” (Barrett, 1987:26).

After its publication, *The Jungle*, as a denouncing and awareness raising novel, has raised a lot of discussion in the American society to the point of drawing the attention of authorities. On the political front, it is important to point out that the novel has led to federal food-inspection laws. As a case in point, after reading the novel in addition to public’s reaction, President Theodore Roosevelt passed the Pure Food and Drug Act along with the Meat Inspection Act in 1906 as a response to Sinclair’s message.

Without any doubt, the novel has considerably raised concerns in the society and Sinclair himself recognizes this impact when he states, “*I aimed at the public’s heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach,*” (Britannica). Though he thought to unveil the working conditions in the meatpacking industry, readers of the novel were more frightened by the food quality. Such problems are what makes the study of *The Jungle* valuable given that they will, in fact, result in authorities’ reactions and the latter are symbolized by the passage of the 1906 two above-mentioned Acts. In a document entitled “The Pure Food and Drug Act”, one can read the impact that Sinclair’s novel has played in the passage of these Acts. As noted:

When Upton Sinclair’s 1906 novel *The Jungle* revealed food adulteration and unsanitary practices in meat production, public outrage prompted Congress to establish federal responsibility for public health and welfare. The Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 prohibited the sale of misbranded or adulterated food and drugs in interstate commerce and laid a foundation for the nation’s first consumer protection agency, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). (U.S. Capitol, web)

As revealed in the afore-mentioned excerpt, *The Jungle* has, on the political front, contributed to the passage of Acts which aimed not only to improve the conditions under which the meat was processed but more importantly to prohibit the sale of misbranded or adulterated food and drugs. In the same vein, Sinclair’s novel has, on the social front, heightened awareness among Americans who were outraged about the meatpacking industry. Building upon this perspective, we should ask these questions: how, through socio-economic disparities, does *The Jungle* expose the disillusionment of immigrant workers in early 20th- century

Chicago, and to what extent does it serve as a critique of capitalist exploitation while proposing socialism as the path to liberation?

To bring to light these questions, this paper aims first to recall the history of the immigrant worker and the myth of the American Dream. In the second section of this study, we scrutinize issues exemplifying the immigrant experience and socio-economic disparities. The last section, titled the political message of *The Jungle* and its critique against capitalism, provides information on how the novel has drawn the attention of authorities in addition to raising awareness among the population.

1. The Immigrant Worker and the Myth of the American Dream

The Jungle, just like several novels dealing with immigration literature, has clearly pointed out how immigrant workers have been lured by the myth of the American Dream. To this regard, it should be acknowledged that, similar to many ideologies, the American Dream has over history been a myth for some immigrants who, irrespective of their initial hopes, ended up being trapped by both living and working conditions that are in contrast with the core tenets of the dream. Sinclair, through his protagonist Jurgis and his family, sheds light on the horrible working conditions that the latter went through.

Thus, by examining the novel, we notice that immigrants are, most of the time, subjected to exploitation or other practices which, from a social point of view, contrast with the American Dream ideology. It is undeniably an ideology that draws the attention of immigrants. In this sense, as above-discussed, immigrant workers left their homeland hoping to grasp better opportunities in the United States and that is what Sinclair writes as follows:

Jurgis, too, had heard of America. That was a country where, they said, a man might earn three rubbles a day, and Jurgis figured what three rubbles a day would mean with prices as they were where he lived, and decided forthwith that he would go to America and marry, and be a rich man in the bargain. In that country, rich or poor, a man was free, it was said... So America was a place of which lovers and young people dreamed. If one could only manage to get the price of the passage, he could count his troubles at an end. (Sinclair, 1906: 22-23)

The above passage clearly describes how the American Dream has lured Jurgis whom, as Sinclair suggested, believed that once in America his

troubles would end. But, following their arrival to America, they will experience several hardships and unfortunately, it is only after being victim of some practices in the labour market that they will realize that their dreams do not reflect what America was supposed to be. What can be drawn from this analysis is that immigrants, regardless of their initial hopes, end up discovering that the American Dream, rather than being a reality, is just a promise that many of them will never achieve.

With regard to this perspective, Pizer argues that, "*Sinclair's novel demonstrates how the myth of opportunity was systematically undermined by the realities of industrial capitalism*" (Pizer, 1988: 42). Immigrants, though they were motivated by the idea of fulfilling their dream which echoes the myth of opportunity, will, as observed by Pizer, find out the realities of industrial capitalism. As an illustration, Jurgis and his wife Ona worked in the meat packing industry where it was impossible for them to achieve their dream. Sinclair underscores this perspective in these terms, "*Jurgis could not bring himself to believe such things—no, it could not be so.*" (Sinclair, 1906: 87).

Jurgis, just like many immigrant workers, finds himself trapped by the myth of the American Dream. To put it differently, even though he believed that hard work can lead to prosperity as defined by the American Dream, he ends up falling in exploitation and marginalization which reflect how the labour market works. To this point, he is compelled to accept the reality of the American Dream which does not guarantee upward mobility in a society where workers are, more often than not, at the mercy of corruption, exploitation, and other socio-economic issues. Regarding the barriers immigrant workers experience, Chernin writes, "*The Jungle dismantles the myth of the American Dream by showing how structural inequalities prevented immigrant workers from achieving upward mobility*" (Chernin, 2010: 77). Chernin's words corroborate our perspective on the myth of the American Dream. In this way, by exploring structural inequalities, he evidences how difficult it is for immigrant workers to progress regardless of their hard work and beliefs on success.

From another angle, along with economic exploitation which Sinclair exemplifies through his protagonist Jurgis, immigrants are also subject to social marginalization. For example, owing to their language barriers and unfamiliarity with American customs, immigrant workers in *The Jungle* are deliberately excluded and exploited. Sinclair, in one specific passage,

notes, “*They were beaten; they had to go to work, and they went; they were driven to it by their hunger and their misery. They were made to feel that they were not wanted in the world, and they were not wanted—they were foreigners, and they were ignorant, and they were poor*” (Sinclair, 1906: 120). In addition to highlighting how immigrants were socially marginalized, this passage also elucidates the economic exploitation they faced due to cultural prejudice.

In the same direction, Sinclair emphasizes the fact that immigrants were foreigners, ignorant, and poor. Such a situation, however, makes them helpless and needy people who cannot but accept their working and living conditions while hoping to grasp a bright future someday. With regard to the working conditions of immigrants, Milkman, in *On the Edge: Immigrant workers and the Future of Labor* (2006), observes that, “*immigrant workers often occupy the most precarious sectors of the labor market, where the promise of opportunity is undermined by systemic vulnerability*” (Milkman, 2006: 34). Milkman’s passage retraces the collapse of the American Dream which, in *The Jungle*, is literally embodied by the immigrant worker.

The latter, as clearly observed in previous passages, is victim of structural inequalities that prevent him from achieving the American Dream. For this reason, some scholars contend that *The Jungle* exposes the collapse of the American Dream by showing how industrial exploitation, corruption, and hard living conditions have crushed the aspirations of the immigrant worker. To illustrate this perspective, let’s consider Martin Bernes’s work *The American Dream and the Issues of Class in Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle* (2021). As he suggests, “*Sinclair demonstrates that the promise of the American Dream is a cruel illusion for immigrant workers, whose labor enriches the capitalist elite while leaving them destitute and powerless*” (Bernes, 2021: 47). Bernes’s analysis reveals how immigrants are, from an economic angle, useful for the capitalist elite but unable to meet their own expectations consisting in achieving the American Dream.

To further our analysis on the myth of the American Dream, we can consider Christophe Den Tandt’s study “Abjection and Oratory in Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*” (1993). According to Tandt, “*the novel depicts urban industrial conditions by linking poverty to abjection and filth, revealing how the immigrant’s dream of prosperity disintegrates into degradation and despair*” (academia.edu). Tandt’s study calls into question the working conditions in the meat-processing industry and it in this context that he lays emphasis on the degradation of immigrants who, owing to their quest for the American Dream, undergo despair along with the unhuman

working conditions. Through Jurgis Rudkus, Sinclair brings to light the issue of despair by portraying his grief, disillusionment, and even exhaustion. As the head of the family, Jurgis considers success as the only means he has to integrate into the American society.

Unfortunately, various events either social or political will hinder his expectations. As a case in point, Jurgis will experience the collapse of the American Dream several times due to those events among which the death of Antanas presented as follows, "*he was beaten to death; he would never be a man again. The world was a place of agony, and he was tortured in it*" (Sinclair, 1906: 163). By describing the death of Antanas, Sinclair brings out the immigrant worker's betrayal by the myth of the American Dream. To put it differently, the death of Antanas discloses the horrible treatment and working conditions that employers had imposed on their powerless workers.

Additionally, when examining *The Jungle*, it is also important to observe that the issue of child labour is a central theme which Sinclair has dealt with and it has also been resumed by other authors and critics of the novel. For instance, through characters including Stanislovas and other children, Sinclair introduces the issue of child labour by showing how the promise of the American Dream has turned into a nightmare for immigrant workers. He notes, "*Stanislovas was put to work in the lard-canning factory, where he had to stand on a platform and tend a machine... He was only fourteen, but he had to go, for they worked all but the babies*" (Sinclair, 1906: 97). This passage about child labour displays the fact that immigrant families believed in hard work to the point of involving children in such a situation which requires sacrifice. For some critics, child labour in Sinclair's novel symbolizes generational exploitation and despair that are unquestionably examples which explain the collapse of the Dream for Lithuanian immigrants. From another perspective, the Dream was not attainable for almost all immigrant workers who initially believed in success through hard work. Among other issues, the myth of the Dream is what justifies the immigrant experience along with the different socio-economic disparities they repeatedly went through during their quest for upward mobility.

2. The Immigrant Experience and Socio-economic Disparities

The theme of the immigrant experience is a theme that holds a core position in Upton Sinclair's novel. *The Jungle*, being therefore a novel that showcases the working conditions in the meatpacking industry, has exhibited the hope of new comers who unluckily will experience exploitation and socio-economic disparities as well. Sinclair, in this sense, writes, "*they were beaten, they were starved, they were frozen, they were robbed, they were murdered—and yet they lived*" (Sinclair, 1906: 92). Through the passive voice, Sinclair indirectly points out how immigrants were severely treated. Furthermore, the use of certain verbs in the above excerpt justifies at which point their treatment was inhuman.

Irrespective of this treatment they collectively experience, they believed in success while seeming to be unaware of the exploitation of employers. As an illustration, Jurgis considers working in a factory as a success regardless of the degrading conditions he daily endures. In this excerpt, for instance, Sinclair investigates the unsanitary labour in the stockyards, "*there would be meat that had tumbled out on the floor, in the dirt and sawdust, where the workers had tramped and spit all over it...*" (Sinclair, 1906: 88). Even if this passage underscores the unsanitary labour in the factory, it remains to consider that such a situation was caused by the quest for survival.

In other terms, economic necessity forces employees to be exploited in order to earn their life. This exploitation results from socio-economic disparities which Sinclair observes as follows, "*so from top to bottom the place was simply a seething cauldron of jealousies and hatreds; there was not loyalty or decency anywhere about it, there was no peace in it where a man counted for anything against a dollar*" (Sinclair, 1906: 55-56). As clearly mentioned, this quotation captures the dehumanizing working conditions which exemplify systemic inequality. Indeed, this inequality is clearly shown by the use of words such as jealousies and hatreds in an environment where profit overrides human life.

In another sense, the issue of socio-economic disparities can be analyzed in terms of separation between immigrants; that is to say black and white immigrants. Capitalist employers were aware of the status of immigrant workers and, as a result, they used it to create division among them based on their race or ethnic group. Those racial and ethnic hierarchies within the working class is a tool for employers to better control their workers. To this regard, Sinclair establishes a comparison between black

immigrants and those from Europe when he suggests that, “*but the black workers from the South were given the worst jobs, and the European immigrants looked down on them as lazy and disorderly*” (Sinclair, 1906: 172).

Without any doubt, the separation between workers is strengthened by systemic inequality put in place by capitalists who seek profit at the expense of workers. However, instead of unity, racial inequality and division prevent solidarity and perpetrate disparities which, as we highlighted earlier, are advantageous for capitalist employers. In his study “Class and Landscape in *The Jungle*”, Steven Rosendale explores how Sinclair uses setting to depict class-based suffering. In Rosendale’s terms, “*Sinclair is at pains throughout the text to demonstrate the industrial environment, which appears to Jurgis as a terrifying wilderness, is not experienced universally but only by members of a particular class under a particular economic regime*” (Rosendale, 2002: 212). Rosendale’s passage echoes our analysis on socio-economic disparities. Through the lens of ecocriticism, he analyzes *The Jungle* by linking class struggle with environmental degradation. What is more important here is that, as he asserts, the exploitation or the dehumanizing working conditions is experienced by a specific group of workers who belong to a particular class that undergoes environmental impairment.

Indeed, such a treatment illustrates briefly the immigrant experience. In this manner, by quoting Jack London on his investigation of *The Jungle*, Pittenger introduces issues of class-based exploitation and systemic inequality in the following passage, “*Jack London proclaimed that Upton Sinclair’s novel The Jungle (1906), an anatomy of American immigrant working class life set partly in Chicago’s wretched and unsanitary packinghouses and their environs, might prove to be the Uncle Tom’s Cabin of wage slavery*” (London, 1906: 458). These words recall how workers in the Chicago’s packinghouses were economically exploited by receiving low wages.

In the same way, Harsh Bhardwaj presents the issue by stressing how *The Jungle* divulgates the socio-economic and structural barriers that obstruct upward mobility for immigrant employees in the meat packing industry. In his passage, one can read the critique of capitalism and the American Dream in these terms, “*the novel underlines poverty, the absence of social programmes, unpleasant living and working conditions, and the despair prevalent among the working class, which is contrasted with the deep-rooted corruption and exploitation on the part of those in power*” (Bhardwaj, 2016: 2). Not only does Bhardwaj stresses both the living and working conditions of workers in

Sinclair's novel but he also draws attention on their exploitation which he relegates to those in power known as the capitalists.

The latter are therefore employers who are mostly characterized by their capitalist ideology which promotes wage slavery or profit over human life. Besides poor living conditions, excessive working hours are what immigrants experience on account of the capitalist system. It is a system which is considered by most critics of the novel as an exploitative system under which profit is prioritized over workers welfare. This is consequently what has led most scholars to interpret *The Jungle* as a critique of exploitation engendered by capitalism. From an economic point of view, we notice that Sinclair outlines that hard work does not translate into economic prosperity for immigrant workers.

In the same vein, by portraying the immigrant experience, Sinclair introduces passages where, due to the lack of economic and social mobility, he compares immigrant workers to enslaved people. He asserts that, *"here was a population, low-class and mostly foreign, hanging always on the verge of starvation, and dependent for its opportunities of life upon the whim of men every bit as brutal and unscrupulous as the old-time slave drivers"* (Sinclair, 1906: 89). The immigrant experience, as written in many literary works, is a mix of hardships, hope, resilience, or even cultural adjustment. In *The Jungle*, it is a theme that has drawn a lot of critiques made by scholars who denounce both the living and working conditions of immigrants.

Eva Deinzer, in her work *The Representation of Immigrant Life in Upton Sinclair's "The Jungle"* (2007), contributes to the debate of the immigrant experience by contextualizing Sinclair's novel to the Progressive Era which, as we observed in our introduction, corresponds the birth of social, political, and economic reforms. These reforms intended to tackle the challenges of industrialization, urbanization, and the inequalities that were prevalent in the American society at that time. That is in this context that Deinzer writes, *"Sinclair represents the immigrant life in his book and how it ties with the reality at that time... The analysis will focus on how Sinclair portrays the living and working conditions faced by immigrants"* (Deinzer, 2007: 1). Building upon Deinzer's quotation, we can state that the living and working conditions faced by immigrants are what we refer to as the immigrant experience.

Likewise, studying the immigrant experience, Hanna Stoklasová describes the destruction of the Lithuanian immigrant family. By so doing, she casts light on the impact of capitalist pressures which, as she

argues, results in the disintegration of immigrant families, “the idea of the American Dream has turned into a lost game, and the strong family unit the Lithuanians had at the beginning has been destroyed” (Stoklasová, 2016: 36). Along with criticizing the American Dream, Stoklasová portrays how *The Jungle* brings to light the harsh realities experienced by immigrants who, in addition to being lured by the Dream, were subject to systemic exploitation and other forms of enslavement in Chicago’s meat packing industry.

To further provide information on the systemic exploitation and inequalities that immigrants experienced in *The Jungle*, it is considerable to refer to a study “Criticism of Capitalism in Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*” in which the authors, Qamariyah and Tirmidi, argue that, “*The Jungle* portrays capitalism as an exploitative system, prioritizing profit over human welfare. As a result, labor oppression, economic insecurity, social inequality, social alienation, and workers’ dehumanization happen” (Qamariyah and Tirmidi, 2023: 14). In this quotation, the authors give examples that explicitly elucidate the socio-economic inequalities that workers encounter on a daily basis.

What’s more, as earlier mentioned, all the hardships that immigrant workers faced are systematically connected to a system put in place in order to take advantage of the working class. This system—known as Capitalism—is a system under which the working class often finds it difficult to meet social and economic mobility. Using a socialist theory, Sinclair perceives capitalism as a system that concentrates wealth and power in the hands of a small group. This group, composed by people known as capitalists, benefits from a lot of advantages and that is what gives them power and authority over their workers. Consequently, to fight against such a system, Sinclair publishes *The Jungle* which, thanks to its political message, is interpreted by many critics and readers as a critique against capitalism.

3. The Political Message of *The Jungle* and its Critique against Capitalism

Published in 1906, *The Jungle* is a novel that discloses both the living and working conditions of immigrants in Chicago’s meatpacking industry at a period, known as the Progressive Era, which was marked by industrialization and urbanization. That is in this context that the meatpacking industry was considered by many Americans as causing the

hiring of undocumented immigrants who believed in the ideology of the American Dream. As a result, immigrants were exploited and they experienced unsanitary working conditions that ended up arousing public attention. In this regard, Upton Sinclair, after spending several months in the meatpacking industry, witnessed the living and working conditions as well.

To put an end to this situation that workers endure, Sinclair writes *The Jungle* which is a protest novel and a critique against capitalism. In this respect, by criticizing the failure of capitalism, he advocates for socialism as being the only alternative to the dehumanizing of the working class. As regards his critique against capitalism, Sinclair introduces an explicit passage in which he addresses the illusion of the American Dream,

A very few days of practical experience in this land of high wages had been sufficient to make clear to them the cruel fact that it was also a land of high prices, and that in it the poor man was almost as poor as in any other corner of the earth; and so there vanished in a night all the wonderful dreams of wealth that had been haunting Jurgis. (Sinclair, 1906: 23)

In the above quote, Sinclair expresses the disillusionment of immigrants by showing how capitalism makes life difficult for the working class for whom America's promise for prosperity is a myth but not a reality. Sinclair continues his denunciation by giving information about the political corruption system whose aim is to maintain the working class at a low and helpless position. He notes, *"the officials who ruled it, and got all the graft, had to be elected first; and so there were two rival sets of grafters, known as political parties, and the one got the office which bought the most votes"* (Sinclair, 1906: 142). By the means of this excerpt, Sinclair indicates how, as a system, capitalism concentrates power as well as wealth in the hands of a few people who rule the society.

That is for this reason that he advocates for socialism as being the system that gives chance to everybody. Robert W. Cherny, by examining the novel considers it as a political manifesto rather than a portrayal of unsanitary conditions. In "The Jungle and the Progressive Era", Cherny exhibits that:

"Sinclair had a larger goal: the rejection of capitalism and the victory of socialism. He intended that his readers would recognize that the horrors portrayed in his book were the result of corporate greed and exploitation

and that the meatpacking industry was but a microcosm of capitalism—that the jungle was actually industrial capitalism” (Cherny, 2006: 45).

Cherny’s terms substantiate our analysis on the political message of Sinclair’s novel which does not only criticize capitalism by revealing the unsanitary conditions but also by advocating for socialism. For Sinclair, socialism is better in the sense that it does not promote exploitation and dehumanizing working and living conditions. However, through his protagonist Jurgis alongside the Lithuanian immigrants, Sinclair presents passages that foster socialist ideology as follows:

Every Socialist did his share, and lived upon the vision of the ‘good time coming’—when the working class should go to the polls and seize the powers of government, and put an end to private property in the means of production. No matter how poor a man was, or how much he suffered, he could never be really unhappy while he knew of that future; even if he did not live to see it himself, his children would, and, to a Socialist, the victory of his class was his victory. (Sinclair, 1906: 376)

By the means of this passage, Sinclair displays his vision of socialism as a collective and democratic movement which aims to empower the working class and abolish private ownership in the means of production. By so doing, there will be no longer any domination and exploitation.

Also, based on his socialist spirit, Sinclair invites the working class to unite in order to fight against capitalism. Regarding this belief that translates the path to liberation through collective action, he writes, “*Organize! Organize! Organize!... Chicago will be ours! CHICAGO WILL BE OURS!*” (Sinclair, 1906: 370). This quote is an excerpt where the Polish Socialist Ostrinski explains the principles and organization of the Socialist Party to Sinclair’s protagonist Jurgis. Moreover, Ostrinski calls Jurgis’s attention on the fact that competition among workers reduces their chances of achieving their goals. For this reason, he proposes collective action as the path to socialism.

Considering the political message of *The Jungle*, it is interesting to outline that Sinclair has managed to raise awareness among the American population and that is, indeed, what is going to call the attention of authorities. The publication of Sinclair’s novel has, in this sense, led to the implementation of some reforms that aimed to improve the conditions under which the meat was processed. For example, as earlier expressed, *The Jungle* is the catalyst of federal legislations namely the Pure

Food and Drug Act along with the Meat Inspection Act which President Roosevelt signed into law on June 30, 1906.

Before signing these laws, President Roosevelt was skeptical of Sinclair's claims. It is therefore after reading the novel and receiving reports from the labor commissioner Charles P. Neill and social worker James Bronson Reynolds that he decided to sign the federal legislation as quoted above. After their investigation, they confirmed Sinclair's allegations in their report by presenting findings known as the Neill-Reynolds report. As a political response, the Pure Food and Drug Act prohibited the interstate transport, the sale of adulterated and misbranded food. With respect to the Meat Inspection Act, it laid emphasis on federal inspection of meatpacking operations. Among its requirements, we can point out the inspection of all cattle, sheep, goats, etc. before and after slaughter.

Consequently, these federal legislations result from *The Jungle* which, in addition to being a protest novel, sparked public outcry and social reforms. As far as the social and political impact of Sinclair's novel are concerned, Ashley McIntyre observes:

Sinclair's *The Jungle* greatly impacted the change in the perceptions and regulations of the food industry... 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. (McIntyre, 2008: 1-2)

McIntyre points out how *The Jungle* has caused social reforms through the regulations of the food industry and its critique against capitalism. Similarly, Puri Bakthawar examines how capitalism exploits the working class to the point of leading to unsanitary working conditions, "*capitalism becomes the main problem that gives miserable life to working class who is oftenly exploited by capitalist class in order to get profit, as represented in Upton Sinclair's The jungle*" (Bakthawar, 2013: 285). Like other authors, Bakthawar exposes the influence of capitalism on the working conditions in the meatpacking industry where profit overrides both health and welfare.

Indeed, such working conditions in the meat processing industry sparked public outcry after the publication of *The Jungle*. Its social impact and political message have been deeply noticed in the American society. To this regard, Christopher Phelps examines Sinclair's social vision in these words, "*Sinclair intended the novel not merely as a catalyst for reform but as a trumpet call for the social imagination... Socialism was the answer to modern-day*

barbarism” (Phelps, 2006). Though the novel has aroused public attention and criticism against capitalism, it remains to note that Sinclair aimed at exposing the working conditions of immigrants but unfortunately the latter received less attention compared to the meat processing which caused response from authorities.

Conclusion

The debate about the living and working conditions of immigrants in the United States is a topical issue that has always been the subject matter of a diverse literature. In fact, it is in this context that Sinclair published *The Jungle* which has exposed the conditions under which immigrants worked in the Chicago stockyards. Throughout this study, questions about both those working and living conditions have been developed to recall Sinclair’s message to the general public.

As an investigative journalist, he spent several weeks in the stockyards to witness not only the filthy processing conditions of the meat but also the working conditions of the immigrants. The latter have unquestionably undergone exploitation which Sinclair intended to denounce and eradicate through the publication of his novel, considered by many readers and critics as a protest and awareness raising novel. To this end, Sinclair advocates for socialism as an alternative to the dehumanizing working conditions caused by capitalism.

It is an economic system under which power and wealth are in the hands of a minority group known as the capitalists who dominate the other social classes. Nonetheless, even though Sinclair’s message has widely been received by the American population, we should bear in mind that authorities prioritized regulatory measures such as the 1906 Food and Drug Act as well as the Meat Inspection Act rather than his proposal for socialism at the expense of capitalism.

What should be concluded here is that the Roosevelt Administration did not end the exploitation undergone by immigrant workers in the meat-processing industry, but instead preferred the passage of legislations to ensure health and safety in that sector. That exploitation is therefore epitomized through the Lithuanian immigrant family which enables us to find out the immigrant experience in early 20th-century America. As such, their initial hope for prosperity—embodied by Sinclair’s

protagonist Jurgis Rudkus—turned into ultimate disillusionment and degradation.

By writing the obstacles experienced by immigrants, Sinclair demonstrates the failure of capitalism while urging for socialism which he considers as an alternative for industrial inequality. In this perspective, *The Jungle* is interpreted as both a literary work and a political text thanks to its role in raising awareness to the point of leading to the passage of federal legislations.

Bibliography

BAKTHAWAR Puri, 2013. “Capitalism in American Society as Represented in Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*”, *LANTERN (Journal on English Language, Culture and Literature)*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 284–294, ejournal3.undip.ac.id/index.php/engliterature/article/view/2565.

BARRETT James R., 1987. *Work and Community in The Jungle: Chicago’s Packinghouse Workers 1894-1922*, Urbana and Chicago: Illinois University Press.

BERNES Martin, 2021. *The American Dream and the Issues of Class in Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle*, in <https://dk.upce.cz/entities/publication/97ee9706>, 14 Aug. 2026.

BHARDWAJ Harsh, 2016. “Fiction as Social History: A study of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*”, *Other Side*, 1(1), 1–10. <https://www.melow.in/public/assets/uploads/article/40.pdf>. 28 Aug. 2026.

BRITANNICA, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Jungle-novel-by-Sinclair>. 14 Oct. 2025.

CHERNIN David, 2010. “Industrial America and the Immigrant Struggle: A study of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*”. *Journal of American Studies*, 44(1), 65–82.

CHERNY Robert W., 2006. “The Jungle and The Progressive Era”, *Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*, in <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/essays/jungle-and-progressive-era>. 21 Aug. 2026.

DEINZER Eva, 2007. *The Representation of the Immigrant Life in Upton’s Sinclair’s “The Jungle”*, GRIN Verlag, in <https://www.grin.com/document/73679>. 12 Aug. 2026.

- MCINTYRE Ashley**, 2008. *Upton Sinclair's The Jungle: The Legal and Social Impacts of a Classic Novel*, Michigan State University, in <http://www.canr.msu.edu/iflr/uploads/files/Student%20Papers/Asley%20McIntyre.pdf>. 26 Aug. 2026.
- MILKMAN Ruth**, 2006. *On the Edge: Immigrant Workers and the Future of Labor*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- PHELPS Christopher**, 2006. *Introduction to The Jungle by Upton Sinclair*, Bedford/St. Martin's.
- PIZER Donald**, 1988. "Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*: The Failure of Capitalism and the Triumph of Socialism", *American Literary Realism*, 20(2), 37–55.
- QAMARIYAH Farihatul and TIRMIDI T.**, 2003. "Criticism of Capitalism in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*", *Prosodi: Journal Ilmiah Universitas Trunojoyo Madura*, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 1-20.
- ROSENDALE Steven**, 2002. "Class and Landscape in *The Jungle*", In *The Greening of Literary Scholarship: Literature, Theory, and the Environment*. University of Iowa Press. <https://www.enotes.com/topics/jungle/criticism/criticism/steven-rosendale-essay-date-2002>. 18 Aug. 2026.
- SINCLAIR Upton**, 1906. *The Jungle*, Massachusetts: Robert Bentley, Inc.
- STOKLASOVÁ Hana**, 2016. "The Social Impact of a Classic Novel", *Ostrava Journal of English Philology*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 29–39. dokumenty.osu.cz/ff/journals/ostravajournal/8-2/2016_2_Stoklasova.pdf. 20 Aug. 2026.
- TANDT Christophe Den**, 1993. "Abjection and Oratory in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*", in https://www.academia.edu/11506210/Abjection_and_Oratory_in_Upton_Sinclair_The_Jungle_The_Contradictionss_of_Political_Discourse_in_America_Literary_Naturalism.
- U.S. CAPITOL VISITOR CENTER**, "The Pure Food and Drug Act", <https://www.visitthecapitol.gov/exhibitions/congress-and-progressive-era/pure-food-and-drug-act>. 16 Oct. 2025.