

Using Primary Sources to Understand the Past:

Upton Sinclair's, *The Jungle*, and Urban Living Conditions (1906)

By Alex Wiese

NCSS Thematic Strand: People, Places, and Culture

Grade Level: 9-12

Class Periods Required: One 50-minute period.

Purpose, Background and Context

Following the tumultuous years of the late 19th century, rife with labor disputes, economic insecurity and social unrest, the Progressive Era (1900-1916) saw a revision of some of the core principles that drove American individualism. To understand why Americans reexamined their beliefs in unregulated industry and rugged individualism, this lesson will have students read an excerpt from Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. This passage puts a face to issues of long work hours, poor working conditions, unbearable living arrangements, and exploitation of the poor, uneducated working class at the turn of the century. After this exercise, students will better understand why issues of Industrial Democracy, child labor, and the minimum wage became so important to Americans during this period.

Goals/Objectives/Student Outcomes/Performance Expectations:

Students Will:

- Understand the relationships between people, places and the environments through examination of living and working conditions of working class Americans at the turn of the twentieth century (NCSS Standards, p. 133);
- They will appreciate the role of culture in shaping their lives and the society in which they live by analyzing the effect living and working conditions influenced people's values in working class communities (NCSS Standards, p. 126);
- Understand the living conditions of working families at the turn of the 20th century that directly contributed to the rise of the progressive policies.

Materials:

Excerpt from Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, p. 106-109, one copy for each student.

Procedures:

Procedure 1: 5 minutes

Via classroom discussion, recap the major issues facing the country during the late 19th century and into the 20th century. This list can include labor unrest (Haymarket affair 1886, Pullman Strike 1894, Coxey's Army 1894), the Second Industrial Revolution along with the effects of urbanization, and the wave of "new" immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe.

This sort of recap would most likely require the class having recently discussed the Gilded Age.

Procedure 2: 10-15 minutes

Distribute the reading from Upton Sinclair's, *The Jungle*, to every student.

Before reading, ensure students know what that *The Jungle* is a primary source. Might pose a question to the class asking if they know the difference between a primary and secondary source, and if they know which one *The Jungle* is. Why do they think that?

Have students read silently. Encourage them to picture what they are reading.

Place questions on the board that could include:

- What would this place have looked like?
- What would the people in the story have looked like?
- What types of people is the story describing? Race, ethnicity, education, gender, etc.

Procedure 3: 5 minutes

Either when students are done reading or time is up (it is ok if not everyone finishes the reading), have students pull out a piece of paper and a writing utensil. Then, have students list 3 words or sentences that were confusing, 2 instances where they thought they could picture/visualize what the story was describing, 1 emotion that they felt while reading this story, and 1 question they have after reading. Teacher may want to write these directions on the board so students know what to do when they are done reading.

If you notice, this is only slightly different from the common 3-2-1 activity.

The 3-2-1 activity will serve as a ticket out of class.

Procedure 4: 10 minutes

Place students into small groups, 3-4 people, and have them discuss what they wrote down.

- Can they help each other with confusing words or sentences?
- Did they choose similar or different passages where they visualized the story?
- Did they share the same emotions or different emotions? Why those emotions?
- Lastly, can students help each other with the questions they listed during the 3-2-1? If not, make note and wait until large group discussion to see if the teacher/ other classmates can help.

Procedure 5: 20 minutes

Bring everyone back together and have students from different groups discuss what they discovered in their small group. Focus the large group discussion on student's remaining questions and then include new questions for thought.

- Did these people have a hard or easy life? Why?
- Was money a concern for them?
- If money was such an issue, why couldn't they just work harder? What are your thoughts on this issue?
- Was work the only hard aspect of life, or were there other people that made life difficult? Did the plumber and landlord treat them fairly do you think? Do you think these people were the same race/ethnicity as the workers?
- What were living and working conditions like? Would you want to work or live there do you think?
- What do you think was my purpose in having you read this today? Are conditions better today than in the story? If so, why do you say so? Do you think they are for everyone? (minimum wage, unions, regulations on working conditions)

Procedure 6: Remaining time

If classroom discussion wanes or there is time remaining, this is an excellent clip from YouTube. The video is a collection of pictures taken from the photojournalist Jacob Riis. Riis is most known for his book, *How The Other Half Lives*, which detailed the tenement houses of urban New York.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZl4KXsaKVE&feature=related>

Does this video confirm what students pictured from the story or is it drastically different? In what ways is it different? If you didn't think it sounded *that* bad, do you still think so? Why have some people's opinions changed?

Assessment of outcomes:

Students will:

Upon completion of the reading, students will answer several questions ranging from what words did they not understand to what emotions they felt while reading. The confusing words and questions will be particularly enlightening to look back upon after the classroom discussion. This 3-2-1 activity will also serve as a ticket out of class. Evaluation of student understanding will also depend on level of participation during discussion.

Extensions and Adaptations:

- Because the reading is slightly long, have the class read the passage together, one at a time out loud, and pose questions intermittently to the whole class. This might be especially useful if much of the class has difficult reading or a smaller vocabulary.
- Examine the relationship between *The Jungle* and the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act. Include political cartoons of the meatpacking industry and urban living conditions from the time period.
- Have students write a journal entry explaining what they felt about the living and working conditions of urban laborers at the beginning of the 20th century. What would they do if they were their employers or landlords? What would they do if they were the laborer?

Resources:

Sinclair, Upton. *The Jungle*. New York: Barnes & Noble Classic, 1906.

Foner, Eric. *Give Me Liberty: An American History*. New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 2009.

**Upton Sinclair's, *The Jungle*.
Pages 106-109. Chicago, 1906.**

DURING THE early part of the winter the family had had money enough to live and a little over to pay their debts with; but when the earnings of Jurgis fell from nine or ten dollars a week to five or six, there was no longer anything to spare. The winter went, and the spring came, and found them still living thus from hand to mouth, hanging on day by day, with literally not a month's wages between them and starvation. Marija was in despair, for there was still no word about the reopening of the canning-factory, and her savings were almost entirely gone. She had had to give up all idea of marrying then; the family could not get along without her—though for that matter she was likely soon to become a burden even upon them, for when her money was all gone, they would have to pay back what they owed her in board. So Jurgis and Ona and Teta Elzbieta would hold anxious conferences until late at night, trying to figure how they could manage this too without starving.

Such were the cruel terms upon which their life was possible, that they might never have nor expect a single instant's respite from worry, a single instant in which they were not haunted by the thought of money. They would no sooner escape, as by a miracle, from one difficulty, than a new one would come into view. In addition to all their physical hardships, there was thus a constant strain upon their minds; they were harried all day and nearly all night by worry and fear. This was in truth not living; it was scarcely even existing, and they felt that it was too little for the price they paid. They were willing to work all the time; and when people did their best, ought they not to be able to keep alive?

There seemed never to be an end to the things they had to buy and to the unforeseen contingencies. Once their water-pipes froze and burst; and when, in their ignorance, they thawed them out, they had a terrifying flood in their house. It happened while the men were away, and poor Elzbieta rushed out into the street screaming for help, for she did not even know whether the flood could be

stopped, or whether they were ruined for life. It was nearly as bad as the latter, they found in the end, for the plumber charged them seventy-five cents an hour, and seventy-five cents for another man who had stood and watched him, and included all the time the two had been going and coming, and also a charge for all sorts of material and extras. And then again, when they went to pay their January's instalment on the house, the agent terrified them by asking them if they had had the insurance attended to yet. In answer to their inquiry he showed them a clause in the deed which provided that they were to keep the house insured for one thousand dollars, as soon as the present policy ran out, which would happen in a few days. Poor Elzbieta, upon whom again fell the blow, demanded how much it would cost them. Seven dollars, the man said; and that night came Jurgis, grim and determined, requesting that the agent would be good enough to inform him, once for all, as to all the expenses they were liable for. The deed was signed now, he said, with sarcasm proper to the new way of life he had learned—the deed was signed, and so the agent had no longer anything to gain by keeping quiet. And Jurgis looked the fellow squarely in the eye, and so he did not waste any time in conventional protests, but read him the deed. They would have to renew the insurance every year; they would have to pay the taxes, about ten dollars a year; they would have to pay the water-tax, about six dollars a year—(Jurgis silently resolved to shut off the hydrant). This, besides the interest and the monthly instalments, would be all—unless by chance the city should happen to decide to put in a sewer or to lay a sidewalk. Yes, said the agent, they would have to have these, whether they wanted them or not, if the city said so. The sewer would cost them about twenty-two dollars, and the sidewalk fifteen if it were wood, twenty-five if it were cement.

So Jurgis went home again; it was a relief to know the worst, at any rate, so that he could no more be surprised by fresh demands. He saw now how they had been plundered; but they were in for it, there was no turning back. They could only go on and make the fight and win—for defeat was a thing that could not even be thought of.

When the springtime came, they were delivered from the dreadful cold, and that was a great deal; but in addition they had counted on the money they would not have to pay for coal—and it was just at

this time that Marija's board began to fail. Then, too, the warm weather brought trials of its own; each season had its trials, as they found. In the spring there were cold rains, that turned the streets into canals and bogs; the mud would be so deep that wagons would sink up to the hubs, so that half a dozen horses could not move them. Then, of course, it was impossible for any one to get to work with dry feet; and this was bad for men that were poorly clad and shod, and still worse for women and children. Later came midsummer, with the stifling heat, when the dingy killing-beds of Durham's became a very purgatory; one time, in a single day, three men fell dead from sunstroke. All day long the rivers of hot blood poured forth, until, with the sun beating down, and the air motionless, the stench was enough to knock a man over; all the old smells of a generation would be drawn out by this heat—for there was never any washing of the walls and rafters and pillars, and they were caked with the filth of a lifetime. The men who worked on the killing-beds would come to reek with foulness, so that you could smell one of them fifty feet away; there was simply no such thing as keeping decent, the most careful man gave it up in the end, and wallowed in uncleanness. There was not even a place where a man could wash his hands, and the men ate as much raw blood as food at dinner-time. When they were at work they could not even wipe off their faces—they were as helpless as newly born babes in that respect; and it may seem like a small matter, but when the sweat began to run down their necks and tickle them, or a fly to bother them, it was a torture like being burned alive. Whether it was the slaughter-houses or the dumps that were responsible, one could not say, but with the hot weather there descended upon Packingtown a veritable Egyptian plague of flies; there could be no describing this—the houses would be black with them. There was no escaping; you might provide all your doors and windows with screens, but their buzzing outside would be like the swarming of bees, and whenever you opened the door they would rush in as if a storm of wind were driving them.

Perhaps the summer-time suggests to you thoughts of the country, visions of green fields and mountains and sparkling lakes. It had no such suggestion for the people in the yards. The great packing-machine ground on remorselessly, without thinking of green fields; and the men and women and children who were part of it never

saw any green thing, not even a flower. Four or five miles to the east of them lay the blue waters of Lake Michigan; but for all the good it did them it might have been as far away as the Pacific Ocean. They had only Sundays, and then they were too tired to walk. They were tied to the great packing-machine, and tied to it for life. The managers and superintendents and clerks of Packingtown were all recruited from another class, and never from the workers; they scorned the workers, the very meanest of them. A poor devil of a bookkeeper who had been working in Durham's for twenty years at a salary of six dollars a week, and might work there for twenty more and do no better, would yet consider himself a gentleman, as far removed as the poles from the most skilled worker on the killing-beds; he would dress differently, and live in another part of the town, and come to work at a different hour of the day, and in every way make sure that he never rubbed elbows with a laboring-man. Perhaps this was due to the repulsiveness of the work; at any rate, the people who worked with their hands were a class apart, and were made to feel it.
