

Jurgis's Longing for Communal Serenity in *The Jungle*

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Upton Sinclair (1878–1968) was an anti-capitalist writer who rejected the exploitative social structure at the beginning of the twentieth century. In *The Jungle* (1906), Sinclair focuses on fictional immigrants, the Rudkus family from Lithuania, who encounter many harsh experiences in Chicago's meat-packing industry during that era. According to Anthony Arthur, Chicago's meat-packing industry was especially notorious as a hotbed for a rationalized system that totally disregarded workers' health and future, and it was impossible for Sinclair to overlook how the system affected workers (55). At that time, social activists like Sinclair found socialism attractive because it allowed oppressed workers to see an alternative capable of settling all the troubles brought on by the top-down system of capitalism (Folsom 509). *The Jungle* is therefore full of illustrations of the labor movement, which saw frequent activity in Chicago at that time; it is as if Sinclair evaluates the importance of strikes, agitation, and assembly happening outside the text. Consequently, as a working-class novel, this writing seems to produce a robust ideology, namely, that socialism is the key that might bring a change to workers. By constructing the processes through which the protagonist Jurgis Rudkus struggles with capitalism and finally finds socialism as his salvation from the burden of oppression in the meat-packing town, Sinclair succeeds in not only presenting anti-capitalist discourse but also reevaluating "the idea of work itself" (Arthur 54). Sinclair writes this novel to take back the right of workers from capital, returning labor from a tool of subordina-

tion back into the worker's hands.

Nevertheless, numerous critiques insist that Sinclair's political writing risks subsuming Jurgis's plight into the author's appeal to the anticipated social change brought about by socialism. Those preceding studies on *The Jungle* seem to attempt to emancipate Jurgis from the author's political principle by way of finding fault with Sinclair's textual treatment of the characters. Therefore, such studies tend to judge this novel as Sinclair's political reportage or propaganda and do not regard it as "high literature" (Billen 1).

However, this paper, which no doubt benefits from these studies, simultaneously raises a question about the extent to which these studies can salvage Jurgis from the morass of political ideology. But it is primarily concerned with how this muddy space of ideological discussion is too sticky for Jurgis to wipe off.

The Jungle Chained to Political Ideology

Sinclair is known as one of America's "muckrakers"⁽¹⁾ who advocated social justice by disclosing the exploitative nature of capitalism, seeking to awake people captured within this system to resistance. Therefore, a number of critiques are directed not at the text itself but at the novel's impact on contemporary American society. In terms of journalism and sociology, those critiques derive *The Jungle's* cultural value from its realistic description based on Sinclair's own interviews with factory workers and observation of the truly frightening nature of meat-packing sweatshops. However, some critiques do not necessarily endorse the cogency of Sinclair's thought. For instance, according to George Shaduri, Sinclair's narrative strategy, which mixes anti-capitalism with socialistic solidarity, has been quite hard for American citizens to follow as a post-capitalism principle (45). Shaduri's remark on the novel's implication reveals Sinclair's myopic admiration for a socialist utopia, also noting the difficulty of realizing Sinclair's appeal to class unity. Furthermore, Scott Derrick criticizes Sinclair's writing, especially the description of Jurgis, that is, "Part of the unconsciousness which has been driving the novel, in other words, and part of what decenters

Jurgis, is finally Sinclair's own will-to-authorship, which twines itself around the 'proper' subject of the novel" (91). These arguments suggest that Sinclair merely immerses himself in a socialist manifesto instead of producing literary treatment of the Lithuanian protagonist's struggle. They attribute the novel's political reputation to Sinclair's storytelling appeal to the diffusion of socialist ideals. However, these arguments tend to repeat that Jurgis's story is still chained to political ideology that, after all, may preclude the literary potentiality of *The Jungle* in the first place.

Ideological Integration and its Problem

Critics have problematically drawn a connection between the novel and Sinclair's socialist appeal to the world outside the text because of its conspicuous ending—a passionate socialist speech by the Party's orator. Hence, subsequently, this section focuses on the ending that depicts Jurgis's afflicted figure as the representative awakening of socialism. *The Jungle* stimulates oppressed workers' class consciousness:

"I am here tonight," he [the speaker] said, "to plead with you, whoever you may be, provided that you care about the truth; but most of all I plead with workmen, with those to whom the evils I have portrayed are not mere matters of sentiment, to be dallied and toyed with, and then perhaps put aside and forgotten—to whom they are the grim and relentless realities of the daily grind, the chains upon their limbs, the lash upon their backs, the iron in their souls! To you, workingmen! To you, the toilers, who have made this land, and have no voice in its councils! To you, whose lot it is to sow that others may reap, to labor and obey, and ask no more than the wages of a beast of burden, the food and shelter to keep you alive from day to day. It is to you that I come with my message of salvation; it is with you that I plead. (282–83)

This speech breaks the seal for *The Jungle*'s finale, which aims for socialist enlightenment of the inconsolable Lithuanian immigrant. In these final pages, Jurgis's awaken-

ing to socialism may reward the exhausting experiences of his tragic life, including the loss of his family. However, Sinclair's narrative treatment of Jurgis often becomes controversial because of the latter's sudden loss of status as the main character. For instance, Matthew Morris insists that this narrative episode is a turning point that divides the novel into two parts (53). Until the chapter that describes Jurgis's escape from the tragedy of Antanas, the novel seems to work as literary fiction dramatizing immigrant workers' plight. However, in the novel's final unfolding, Jurgis commits himself to socialism as if political activism alone could provide his salvation. Understandably, therefore, the story has gradually assumed nature of propaganda through the view of Jurgis. However, Morris argues that Sinclair's political concern intentionally transforms the Rudkus family's tragic description into preparative apparatus for the remaining chapters that unfold, more or less, as advocacy of socialism (53). This implies the changed role of Jurgis from a representative character of victimized immigrants to an agent who delivers a political manifesto. Focusing upon Sinclair's intended message in *The Jungle*, George Becker reveals its content as the "common man must become master of his own destiny by means of the sane and curative measures of Socialism" (135). The final propaganda speech, which awakens Jurgis's faith in socialism with acute emotional force, enables Sinclair to codify oppressed workers instead of representing them. For the sake of this political message to appeal to the masses, Sinclair is often criticized because he reduces the complexity of oppressed workers to the single term "workingmen."

In the novel, this comprehensive word, "workingmen," seems quite effective in highlighting class consciousness; it is obvious in Sinclair's description of the people's reaction after the party orator's speech. Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe offer a plausible reason for some danger in Sinclair's writing:

In our view, in order to advance in the determination of social antagonisms, it is necessary to analyse the plurality of diverse and frequently contradictory positions, and to discard the idea of a perfectly unified and homogenous agent, such as the 'working class' of classical discourse. The search for the 'true' working class

and its limits is a false problem, and as such lacks any theoretical or political relevance. (84)

A perception of internal complexity that informs class formation is so crucial for Laclau and Mouffe that they often insist on the impossibility of an assertive class. For them, the idea of “articulation” is crucial in connecting divided categories comprising social blocs. The categories are tossed around like unanchored islands on a wave, and articulations are like crucial suspension bridges among these islands that allow them to recognize each other as part of the whole “plurality.” Laclau and Mouffe point to the need for neutrality and balance by a bridgeable articulation because lack of balance risks giving one side a privileged position. They therefore reject the homogeneous concept of class because it does not accept differential characteristics within a class and may legitimate “a new form of fixity” (87). In *The Jungle*’s socialist speech, frequent use of the word “workingmen” is easily perceived. The solidarity within the bloc is moreover reinforced by Jurgis’s receptive attitude toward further change brought by oncoming socialism—even if it is still intangible. Many scholars criticize such manipulative integration of a wide variety of working people into a single, ideologically charged category of “workingmen” by Sinclair. According to them, the author’s political intention focuses on Jurgis’s awakening to socialism so intensely that it fails to take notice not only of Jurgis’s position itself but also positions of other oppressed workers⁽²⁾.

While these statements reveal the danger of the final socialist speech, doubt still remains as to whether their focuses on Sinclair’s socialist writing might in turn reinforce the idea that the novel is the author’s propaganda. Clearly, these statements are not contented with the accuracy of Sinclair’s writing through his alleged insincere treatment of labor. Even if it means that the produced ideology for all “workingmen” cannot correspond to each fractionalized difference among the various types of workers, there is no doubt that Sinclair sympathizes with exploited workers laboring under the dominant forces of capitalism. He is convinced that for powerless individual workers, acting in solidarity is very crucial for resisting the oppressive social system.

Then, is it possible to think that Sinclair is indifferent to Jurgis's harsh, isolated experience, which represents immigrant workers' various plights? Is it possible to think that Jurgis's literary role is bifurcated—as if there is no sustainable dialogue between his oppressed experience as a Lithuanian immigrant before the final episode and his energetic commitment to a social movement? Does the novel's representation of the working class lose the suspension bridges among fractionalized workers for them to grasp their mutual articulation?

The *Veselija* as a Communal Memory for Lithuanian Immigrants

To reveal Jurgis's social position in *The Jungle*, it is necessary to focus on Sinclair's descriptive approach to the Lithuanian worker's foreignness. In the beginning of the story, Jurgis appears as a self-confident and ambitious man who aims to achieve the American dream. Immediately after he sets to work, however, he encounters a series of crises—loss of family members, entrapment by fraud with the purchase of an unsanitary house, and exploitation by the meat-packing industry, fraught with his own serious injury. Through these crises, he gradually understands the capitalist system's true nature, how it exploits the manpower of the poor workers and relegates their human rights to subordinate status. As Alfred Erich Senn and Alfonsas Eidintas assert, “Sinclair's Rudkus was the classic ‘marginal man’ in a ‘marginal culture’ that was crumbling under strains imposed by an urban industrialized society” (5). The anti-capitalism discourse emerges from a series of misfortunes befalling Jurgis under inhumane working conditions.

From the beginning of the story, furthermore, the cultural heritage of the Rudkus family that differentiates Lithuanian immigrants from other ethnic groups manifests itself in the scene of the Lithuanian wedding ceremony, the *veselija*. The third-person narration highlights the traditional necessity of the marriage ritual for a new couple. As they obtain through the event peace of mind for a future that money cannot buy, they do not hesitate to spend money on the ceremony in spite of their poor finances:

It [the *veselija*] is very imprudent, it is tragic—but, ah, it is so beautiful! Bit by bit these poor people have given up everything else, but to this they cling with all the power of their souls—they cannot give up the *veselija*! To do that would mean, not merely to be defeated, but to acknowledge defeat—and the difference between these two things is what keeps the world going. The *veselija* has come down to them from a far-off time, a time when money was made for man and not man for money—when the fruits of the earth belonged to the person who tilled it, and when plenty and to spare was the reward of honest toil. (10, italics original)

This scene constructs the image of Lithuanian immigrants who come from another cultural sphere. Although there are some Lithuanian writers who criticize Sinclair's depiction as inauthentic⁽³⁾, the *veselija*, in the midst of its liveliness, is given a function to enable Lithuanian immigrants to forget "Chicago and its saloons and its slums" (5). The *veselija* symbolizes Lithuanian culture's spiritual aspects. This celebratory ritual is permeated with Lithuanians' own tradition, which remains untouched by industrialism and reminds them of the motherland and its culture. As Ralph Halpern elucidates, in Sinclair's time, many immigrant communities, akin to Sinclair's description of the Lithuanian, functioned to remind people of "the old-world community left behind" (432). The communal reestablishment of the remains of their motherlands provided immigrants a special place of relief. Although some communities insisted on cultural differences among each one's specific characteristics, it was quite hard to find the cultural specificity of the serenity that those immigrants share (433). Moreover, Arthur observes that music played by an immigrant violinist in the midst of the *veselija* becomes the most important factor reminding people of the familiar scenes of their motherland (50). The music, connecting rather scattered, or fragmental passages of the feast participants, stockyards, and Jurgis's anxiety, functions as "the bridge between the old world and the new" (50). And it is significant that Sinclair's writing represents the description of the motherland, which imaginarily emerges in the space saturated with the music—less as any specific Lithuanian cul-

ture than as a lost landscape that immigrants cannot see at the stockyards. The *veselija* thus provides irreplaceable time with serenity. For Jurgis, this serenity is not temporary but is recalled with the precious memory of his family whenever he regretfully realizes how hard it is to recapture. But the rapid acceleration of American capitalism deprives him and other immigrants of the old-world culture's relief function.

Each time that the Rudkus family encounters financial problems, they repress and marginalize their own culture in the United States because they understand that adherence to their habitual practice does not offer their hand-to-mouth living any tangible profit. When the family loses Teta Elzbieta's son, little Kristoforas, from food poisoning caused by tainted sausage, Jurgis's ruthless reaction to the boy's death is irreconcilable with Elzbieta's motherhood. Rejecting her demand for a proper funeral, Jurgis presupposes that "the child [Kristoforas] would have to be buried by the city, since they had no money for a funeral; ... Her child to be buried in a pauper's grave!" (117). Although his decision might be heartless, it is true that his suggestion to save money would provide more food for them and finally prevent more of them falling victim to poverty. For the impoverished Lithuanian immigrant, adapting to the dominant culture is the same as marginalizing their original culture due to a materialistic view of money's value.

Here, the Lithuanian culture itself initiates Jurgis's lower social position in the cultural hierarchy in the United States. To highlight their cultural difference, it is important for Sinclair resolutely to censure the sweatshop system's exploitation of the ignorant immigrant labor like Jurgis, with the image of "a good-hearted, hardworking, but probably not too intelligent group of foreigners" (Senn and Eidintas 5). This repetitive image does not necessarily reflect Sinclair's treatment of Jurgis as an instrument to set up his political achievement but rather exposes the tyrannical moment of the sweatshop through which the sequence of exploitation gradually deprives workers of dignity and relegates them to mere cogs in the wheel of industrial capitalism's dominant system. In other words, Jurgis's low social position as a Lithuanian immigrant is never an essential given, but a gradually constructed dishonor. Michael Denning implies that alienation and undervaluation of immigrants perme-

ated the American society:

Ethnicity and race had become the modality through which working-class peoples experienced their lives and mapped their communities. The symbolic structures of ethnicity and race were the products of slavery and migrant labor, segregated labor markets, legal codes of exclusion and restriction, ... Though the forms—the rituals and emblems—of ethnic cultures differed, the content had much in common: it was the content of working class tenements, sweatshop and factory labor, and cheap mass entertainments. The invention of ethnicity was a central form of class consciousness in the United States. (239)

Denning is aware of immigrants' homogenized states by which each group is produced according to their daily struggles. This quotation furthermore implies that replacement of the cultural representation happens here. Laclau and Mouffe consider race and ethnicity as differing, unstable categories established in advance (84), but Denning registers them as "modality" in relation to capital (239), which appeared after the destruction of primitive society. Denning's analysis is set in the period of "the restructuring" of the nation that relentlessly incorporates "racialized" and "ethnicized" immigrants into American labor force (239). As severe life in the stockyards deprives Jurgis and his family of their spiritual culture, they become commodities, having no chance of survival except by submitting themselves to the exploitative social system. In this moment, their original Lithuanian culture, in which they believe as memory, serenity, and connection with the motherland, is replaced with the cruel recognition that they have become cogs in the working-class wheel.

Jurgis, who is aware of socialism's possibilities, has already become part of the stockyards' immigrant labor force, and his figure differs almost completely from that of his Lithuanian past. Therefore, Morris's assessment that Jurgis's life is bifurcated seems easily comprehensible. Morris observes, "By the end of the novel, Sinclair ceases to pay attention to the specifically Lithuanian qualities of the Rudkus family" (57). However, there is a consistent link between his commitment to social move-

ment and its motive, and the link cannot exist without his figure previous to his political awakening. That is, even though Jurgis internalizes his original culture with its implication of low social position, this is not synonymous with complete erasure of his ethnicity. In reconsidering Sinclair's immersion in social change and the assumed literary fault in his depiction of the immigrant's story, three factors might scrupulously endorse the author's literary account of the immigrant's story. First, Sinclair's writing is not indifferent to Jurgis's Lithuanian culture because the author well understands that poor immigrant laborers have no choice but to survive by assuming the low cultural position's dishonor, and they did not bring that dishonor from their own country. Second, it is quite hard for Sinclair to separate Jurgis's class consciousness from his exploited experience. This relationship is explained in detail in the next section. Third, and most importantly, what is "the specificity of Lithuanian qualities"? In the early twentieth-century United States, as Denning implies, immigrant laborers' diverse cultural features were homogenized into the poor working class, regardless of differences in their "rituals and emblems." Sinclair's writing might be problematic because of its reckless portrayal of Lithuanian culture, but Michael Brewster Folsom challenges this; he states that "the function of these chapters [the beginning scene of *veselija* and the ending in social movement] is to achieve psychic balance and repose by creating in imagination the ideal future as it might actually be lived in the present" (509). Folsom insists on literary sense in *The Jungle* as a literary novel, and he elaborately introduces the process of how Sinclair struggled to write an alternative style of novel, differing from the conventional American literary tradition. His quotation implies that Sinclair is not so extremely radical but has achieved composure about what happens in contemporary society. Folsom's statement suggests the author's literary attention to both what is inside and outside the text. According to him, Sinclair writes this novel so readers can actualize their imaginative vision of a better future (504). His focus on the *veselija* is especially reliable because he states that it represents the embodied preservation of composure for the immigrants to feel communal serenity far from the speed-up, meat-packing industry (509). In this statement, Sinclair's treatment of the immigrant community is more general rather

than special to the Lithuanian community. Sinclair's writing has the possibility of escaping essentialism in terms of a "given racialized culture." The remarkable factor in the *veselija* scene is not its specificity to Lithuanian culture but the serenity it brings the immigrant community.

Jurgis' Longing to Recapture Serenity

Even if it is obvious that Jurgis is a victim, his impulsive violence toward the dominant class consequently exposes his low social position, which does not employ any personal resistance without violence. When Jurgis is arrested in spite of Phil Connor's absolute misdeed, this incident reveals the social inequality between the dominant group and the representative, oppressed Jurgis. Furthermore, Sinclair understands the false consciousness of naive, oppressed people that every social class possesses and shares a common ethical viewpoint about social equality (Tavernier-Courbin 255). Hence, Jurgis's descent with the tragic events after his imprisonment and release is not only inevitable but also reasonable.

June Howard imputes Jurgis's relentless agony to his criminal history: his "misfortunes come close to turning him into a brute as well as an ignorant victim and destroying him as a human being" (158). Thus, the victimized immigrant cannot stop his fall until the final socialist speech. Regarding his change from "an ignorant victim" to a labor agitator, preceding studies such as Derrick's generally consider the final socialist speech a turning point of Jurgis's life, but besides that it is also the vanishing point of Jurgis's life as an oppressed immigrant protagonist. This viewpoint immerses its analytic interest in the final speech so that the previous part stays out of sight. However, it is significant to evoke what Jurgis learns after his fall, before his awakening to socialism. When he learns the limitation of violence as resistance in grief, he is no longer ignorant:

Jurgis had looked into the deepest reaches of the jungle, and grown used to the sights in them. Yet when he had thought of all humanity as vile and hideous, he

had somehow always excepted his own family, that he had loved ... Memories of the old life—his old hopes and his old yearnings, his old dreams of decency and independence! ... He lived again through that day of horror when he had discovered Ona's shame—God, how he had suffered, what a madman he had been! (272)

This scene might appear to clarify the incorrigible consequence of Jurgis's own choice and its foolishness. Without giving careful attention to the meaning of his grief, former studies posit that except for the final socialist speech coming after this tragic scene, Sinclair does not allow Jurgis any relief inside the text. From this perspective, turning a skeptical eye upon how Sinclair makes political use of Jurgis and his family for his propaganda, the debasement of the sacrificial Lithuanian family is considered a mere stage-setting apparatus for Sinclair's advocacy of socialism, which is synonymous with anti-capitalism for the muckraker. From this perspective, Jurgis's dishonorably lost family members become phantoms tormenting Jurgis's rational thought, irreparable commitment to crime, and escape from the stockyards and the immigrant community. However, as Folsom analyzes Sinclair's aim for a better future, those tragic events are not just a curse for Jurgis, but a recognition of what he should recreate. The scene in which Jurgis meets his family again toward the story's end would require not only rediscovery of his bond to his lost community but also a rereading of socialism's meaning for Jurgis:

Poor Jurgis was not very happy in his home-life. Elzbieta was sick a good deal now, and the boys were wild and unruly, and very much the worse for their life upon the streets. But he stuck by the family nevertheless, for they reminded him of his old happiness; and when things went wrong he could solace himself with a plunge into the Socialist movement. (310)

Certainly, Jurgis is no longer ignorant: he reconfirms the irreplaceable nature of his family and pledges never to relinquish the serenity that the community offers. This

promise subsequently underpins his enthusiasm for the socialist movement. It is true that Jurgis is deprived of belonging to his family and the immigrant community. For him, the experience means the loss of his material connection to traditional Lithuanian culture. However, as it has been confirmed that the Lithuanian culture Sinclair describes has no specific or essential Lithuanian feature, Jurgis would be aware that his lost culture is not irrecoverable in terms of creation and imagination. Regarding the Lithuanian community and its culture in this novel, the important feature is not derived from the intrinsic characteristics of any specific cultural practices such as the *veselija* but the transcultural sense of belonging to a community that reminds immigrants, in the midst of the *veselija*, of their shared serenity. By recapturing this serenity, Jurgis's commitment to the socialist movement becomes his hope for the future. His immigrant figure never really disappears despite critics' insistence that it does. The political discussion does not bifurcate Jurgis's characteristics.

Thus, Sinclair does not immerse Jurgis into strategic advocacy for socialism. On the contrary, Jurgis is eager to stay connected with his immigrant community, and his political commitment never runs ahead of his longing for the serenity he can grasp in the community with his family. Therefore, we should reject labelling *The Jungle* as a political propaganda and restore its literary reputation in the analysis involving Jurgis's rediscovery of his communal serenity.

Notes

- (1) Carl Jensen offers more explanation and information about other muckrakers in *Stories that Changed America: Muckrakers of the 20th Century*.
- (2) J. Michael Duvall points out that as the final speech integrates the entire working class into a single category, "the novel eliminates ... women and African American laborers, even while striving to articulate a socialism inclusive of all workers" (31).
- (3) Giedrius Subačius is skeptical about Sinclair's recognition of the Lithuanian culture;

the lowliness of the Lithuanian is replaced by Sinclair's political concern, but the cultural position is still chained to lowliness (5).

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