
Muckraker Upton Sinclair: Social Justice And The Jungle

Merriam-Webster defines muckrake as: “to search out and publicly expose real or apparent misconduct of a prominent individual business,” an example of a muckraker would be Upton Sinclair. Upton Beall Sinclair was a “prolific” American novelist that exposed the meat-packing industry through his work, *The Jungle*, and was an advocate for worker’s rights. Sinclair’s influence greatly impacts modern-day social justice journalism. Eventually, Sinclair was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1943 for his work *Dragon’s Teeth*. Upton Sinclair is a very influential American novelist and still remains to have a monumental impact on modern-day social justice.

Born in 1878 in Maryland, Upton Sinclair experienced an impoverished childhood; yet, he was still “exposed to the privileges of the upper class” through his mother’s side of the family. By the age of twenty, Sinclair finished his college studies and began his journalism adventure. Through failure after failure, Sinclair never gave up his novelism dreams and got his big break in 1906. *The Jungle*, a novel exposing the meat-packing industry, became a “massive best seller, and was translated into 17 languages within months of its release.” The impact of *The Jungle* became so widespread that one reader was President Theodore Roosevelt, “who--despite his aversion to Sinclair’s politics--invited Sinclair to the White House and ordered an inspection of the meatpacking industry. As a result, the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act were both passed in 1906.” Sinclair’s novel changed the federal laws for inspection and gave the people a true idea of what they had been eating. Sinclair commented, “I aimed at the public’s heart and by accident I hit it in the stomach.” Through being a phenomenal writer, Sinclair brought exposure to a corrupt industry and impacted new food laws for the nation’s own good.

Social justice and safety were very important topics to Upton Sinclair. *The Jungle* is a perfect example of Sinclair’s loyalty to social justice. While gathering information to write his novel, Sinclair went undercover into the Chicago meatpacking factories. After several hard weeks, Sinclair finally had the evidence he needed to expose the meatpacking industry’s labor practices. “When *The Jungle* was published, its readers were outraged--but not in the way Sinclair had hoped.” Their primary concern was food quality rather than the dangerous labour practices and cruel treatment of animals that Sinclair sought to expose. “I aimed at the public’s heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach,” he said,” Britannica stated. Sinclair’s initial effort was to unmask the way employees had been treated; however, his novel made the public more anxious about what they had been consuming. This alternated impression still assisted the American people to fight for business regulation practices and new food laws.

In *The Jungle*, Sinclair uses imagery to vastly describe the meatpacking process and workers’ safety complications. Sinclair places an emphasis on the disturbing and revolting working conditions in the meatpacking industry. An excerpt from chapter fourteen of *The Jungle* states, “There was never the least attention paid to what was cut up for sausage; there would come all the way back from Europe old sausage that had been rejected, and that was moldy and white--it would be dosed 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 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 the rats, bread, and meat would go into the hoppers together. This is no fairy story and no joke; the meat would be shoveled into carts, and the man who did the shoveling would not trouble to lift out a rat when he saw one--there were things that went into the sausage in comparison with which a poisoned rat was a tidbit." Sinclair discusses the disgusting working conditions of the meatpacking industry, specifying on what went into the meat itself. The imagery that Sinclair displayed took its toll on the public, sickening them as they read this excerpt. Other employees' working conditions were not any better than the meatpackers. In chapter nine of *The Jungle*, the novel states, "There were those who worked in the chilling rooms, and whose special disease was rheumatism; the time limit that a man could work in the chilling rooms was said to be five years. There were the wool pluckers, whose hands went to pieces even sooner than the hands of the pickle men; for the pelts of the sheep had to be painted with acid to loosen the wool, and then the pluckers had to pull out this wool with their bare hands, till the acid had eaten their fingers off. There were those who made the tins for the canned meat; and their hands too, were a maze of cuts, and each cut represented a chance for blood poisoning." Employees of the meatpacking company were at risk for severe health issues that could have led to larger future complications. The disturbing imagery that Sinclair used to write *The Jungle* assisted in urging the public to revolt against these common and unforgivable business practices.

President Theodore Roosevelt was one of the disgusted readers of *The Jungle*. Roosevelt understood the public's reaction to this novel and decided he needed to take action on regulating the food industry. Britannica comments, "Using the public's reaction to the novel, U.S. Pres. Theodore Roosevelt pushed Congress to pass both the Pure Food and Drug Act, which ensured the meatpacking plants processed their products in a sanitary manner, and the Meat Inspection Act, which required that the U.S. Department of Agriculture inspect all livestock before slaughter." Although not the original execution plan of Upton Sinclair's novel, this plan ensured food safety for citizens and sanitary working conditions for employees. Sinclair influenced men of high stature to create new laws to assist the every-day average citizen.

In 1943, Upton Sinclair won a Pulitzer Prize for his novel *Dragon's Teeth*. The novel *Dragon's Teeth* is summarized to, "An American in Germany fights against the rising tide of Nazi Terror in this monumental saga of twentieth-century world history." In *Dragon's Teeth*, Sinclair tells a story of the spread of Hitler's impact on the spread of Nazi influence, this Nazi influence leads to the takeover of Germany. Sinclair writes, "World War victims, depression victims, psychopaths, drug addicts, perverts, criminals--they all needed Adolf a little more than Adolf needed them, and he welded them into something more powerful than themselves." Adolf Hitler's influence ran rampant in the growing Nazi culture and propaganda, using people from every walks of life as his own secret weapons. Sinclair discusses in *Dragon's Teeth* how Hitler's immense leadership on Germany controlled its citizens in a way that they depended on Hitler for survival.

Dragon's Teeth puts an emphasis on Hitler's rise in influence during the global stock market crash and how he compares to several other influential conquerors. This novel insinuated to the public that Hitler's actions as a leader created mass destruction and terrible accountability of his nation. To compare Hitler to these men of statute, Sinclair wrote, "A world conqueror had

appeared in modern times. Alexander, Caesar, Attila, Genghis Khan, Napoleon--another such as these, appearing in the age of electricity, of rotary presses and radio, when nine men out of ten would have said it was impossible. A world conqueror has to be a man of few ideas, and those fixed; a peculiar combination of exactly the right qualities, both good and bad--iron determination, irresistible energy, and no scruples of any sort. He has to know what he wants, and permit no obstacle to stand in the way of getting it. He has to understand the minds of other men, both foes and friends, and what greeds, fears, hates, jealousies will move them to action. He must understand the mass mind, the ideals or delusions which sway it; he must be enough of a fanatic to talk their language, though not enough to be controlled by it. He must believe in nothing but his own destiny, the glorified image of himself on the screen of history; whole races of mankind made over in his own image and according to his own will. To accomplish that purpose he must be a liar, thief, and murderer upon a world-wide scale; he must be ready without hesitation to commit every crime his own interest commands, whether upon individuals or nations." Sinclair uses his words to describe how Hitler compares to famous world conquerors and the steps he needed to take to become a successful ruthless leader. To become the leader Hitler had desired to be, he had to have no hesitation or remorse. However, Hitler still had to learn respect without giving in to another's image. In *Dragon's Teeth*, Sinclair also discusses corrupt politics, public safety, and religious prejudice.

Upton Sinclair won the Pulitzer Prize in Novel/Fiction in 1943 for *Dragon's Teeth*. The Pulitzer Prize is "any of a series of annual prizes awarded by Columbia University, New York City, for outstanding public service and achievement in American journalism, letters, and music. (Britannica)" Very few Pulitzer Prizes are given out every year and they reflect the impact a person has had on society and the public. Upton Sinclair was awarded the Prize for Novelism and his influence of teaching others about the destructive history of the global stock market crash and Hitler's push towards World War Two.

In conclusion, Upton Sinclair was a very contributory man to modern-day society's standards and formation. Sinclair helped encourage the public to take action against demoralized companies, and assisted Theodore Roosevelt in the inducing of the Pure Food and Drug Act as well as the Meat Inspection Act in 1906. With his third book of his Lanny Budd series, Sinclair facilitated the history of the global stock market crash and Hitler's unforgivable actions as a leader. Hopefully, Sinclair's influence will remain prevalent to future generations to come.