Jungle Essay, Research Paper

The family knows all the dirty secrets of the meat-packing industry. The most

spoiled of meats becomes sausage. All manner of dishonesty exists in the selling

diseased, rotten, and adulterated meat to American households. The working

members of the family fall into a silent stupor due to the grinding poverty and

misery of their lives. Ona and Jurgis grow apart. Jurgis begins to drink

heavily. He delivers himself from full-blown alcoholism through force of will,

but the desire to drink always torments him. Antanas suffers all manner of

childhood illnesses, but the measles attacks him with fury. However, he reaches

his first birthday owing to his strong constitution despite the privations under

which his family suffers. He is perpetually malnourished like the rest of

Packingtown. Ona, pregnant again, develops a bad cough and suffers increasingly

frequent bouts of hysterical crying. Winter arrives again, and with it comes the

grueling rush season. Fifteen and sixteen hour workdays are frequent. Twice, Ona

does not return home at night. She explains that the snow drifts kept her away,

so she stayed with a friend. Jurgis discovers that she lied about staying with

her friend. He wrangles a confession out of her. Sobbing hysterically, Ona

confesses that, Connor, a boss at her factory continually harassed her and

pleaded with her to become his mistress. Eventually, he raped her in the factory

after everyone had gone home. He threatened to arrange the firings of every wage

earner in her household. Moreover, he threatened to prevent them from obtaining

work in Packingtown ever again. With these threats, he forced her into

accompanying him to Miss Henderson’s brothel in the evenings for the past two

months. The recent snowstorms prevented Ona from returning home twice. Jurgis

storms to Ona’s workplace. It takes more than a half dozen men subdue him before

he can choke the life out of Connor. Jurgis is arrested and taken to jail where

old men and boys, hardened criminals and petty criminals, innocent men and

guilty men share the same squalid quarters. Jurgis’s trial date is set, and his

bond is three hundred dollars. Jurgis spends the Christmas holidays in jail,

worrying about his family. While Jurgis awaits his trial, he becomes friends

with his cell mate, Jack Duane. Jack claims to be an educated man from the East.

His father committed suicide after his business failed. Jack claims that a big

company later cheated him out of a lucrative invention. After his misfortunes,

Jack became a safe-breaker. Before his trial, Jack gives Jurgis his mistress’s

address and encourages him to seek his help should the need arise. Jurgis’s

trial is a farce. Kotrina and Teta Elzbieta attend it. Connor and several

witnesses testify that Conner fired Ona fairly, and Jurgis attacked him for

revenge. Jurgis tells his side of the story through an interpreter, but the

judge is not sympathetic. He sentences Jurgis to thirty days in prison. Jurgis

begs for clemency because his family will starve, but the judge remains firm. In

Bridewell, Jurgis and the other prisoners spend the greater portion of their

time breaking stone. He writes a postcard to his family to let them know where

he is. Ten days later Stanislovas visits to tell him that he, Ona, Marija, and

Teta Elzbieta have all lost their jobs. They are unable to pay rent or buy food.

Marija is suffering blood poisoning because she cut her hand at work. Ona lies

in bed, crying all day. Teta Elzbieta’s sausage factory shut down. Stanislovas

lost his job after a snowstorm prevented him from going to work for three days.

No one can obtain other jobs because they are too sick and weak and because

Conner is scheming to prevent them. Stanislovas asks if Jurgis can help them.

Jurgis has no more than fourteen cents to give. Kotrina, Stanislovas, and the

children earn money selling papers. Their only other income comes through

begging. Commentary Packingtown is full of predators. Connor, empowered through

his criminal connections, violates the marriage bond between Jurgis and Ona. No

individual really has the power to fight for themselves. Marija tried to fight

for her full wages only to be fired. Ona cannot afford to reject Connor’s

advances because he has the power to ruin her family. The wage laborer is

systematically crippled and silenced by the power structure enabled by

capitalism. Jurgis’s attack on Connor would be perfectly justified according to

the values of the American reading public. A man has violated his wife against

her will. However, judges are bought and sold by men with power and money, so

Jurgis spends thirty-three days in jail for his attack. Sinclair clearly means

to charge capitalism with perverting the American justice system. The judge

cares little that his ruling means the difference between starvation and

security, albeit precarious, for an entire family. Sinclair also charges

capitalism with being anti- Christian. Christianity was and still is a strong

social force in American culture. Jurgis spends the Christmas holidays separated

from his family. Moreover, his time in jail leads to their eviction from their

home. Sinclair means to portray capitalism as a threat to fundamental American

values again. The family suffers a slew of misfortunes following Jurgis’s

imprisonment. This clearly marks the family’s inevitable descent into run.

Despite all of their best efforts to provide greater opportunities to the next

generation, no sacrifice by the older one is enough. The odds are stacked too

high against them. All of the able- bodied children have to work after Jurgis’s

imprisonment. Even that provides them with barely enough income to survive.

Marija has suffered an injury that may eventually require the amputation of her

hand. Stanislovas’s hands are already damaged by frostbite. Everywhere in

Packingtown, there are wage laborers who suffer from some form of permanent

disfigurement directly and indirectly related to their work. In a sense, the

prevalence of these disfiguring injuries is a metaphor for butchery of human

bodies. Human beings are butchered in the service of profit-making as well as

the animals. Hard work, family values, self-reliance, and self- motivated action

do absolutely nothing to provide the means for social advancement. The wage

laborers that populate The Jungle are moved inevitably towards ruin and abuse by

forces beyond their control. Capitalism is a forces as inevitable and careless

as nature. It picks off unfortunate individuals as carelessly as cold weather,

disease, and heat exhaustion.