

"the jungle: fiction,
history, or both?"



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The classification of Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle* is ambivalent as it contains elements characteristic of both fiction and historical writing. These elements, including imaginary events which define fiction or literature, and the real events or statistics that comprise history, make it difficult to define *The Jungle*, as they are tightly interwoven throughout the novel. However, with the aid of a theoretical model for analyzing narrative, fiction, and historical writing provided by writers such as Hayden White and E. M. Forester, the relationship between fiction and history in *The Jungle* becomes clearer. White argues that Sinclair's novel is not purely historical because imaginary events appear throughout the novel and work to group the novel within the literary genre. Yet, according to White, all historical writing must have a visible moral basis, and because fictional events and elements of literary narrative provide a moral basis, the novel maintains this aspect. Forester's work augments White's theory by explaining how literary devices such as plot development create meaning in Sinclair's novel.

White's essay "On Narrative" gives a definition of what constitutes as a legitimate historical narrative, information that is applicable to *The Jungle* as it helps classify the novel's aspects of literary and historical writing. One key point White argues is that, "the very distinction between real and imaginary events, basic to modern discussions of both history and fiction, presupposes a notion of reality in which "the true" is identified with "the real" only insofar as it can be shown to possess the character of narrativity" (6). In other words, he says the real events that comprise a historical account must take on the narrative forms common to imaginary events—those of fiction or literature—to have a coherent meaning or "truth." Thus, a historical narrative

must show a moral stance. He also explains that this is a difficult process because unlike imaginary events, which by nature take expression via narrative, there is an, "artificiality [in] the notion that real events could 'speak themselves,'" (4) and provide moral meaning. Thus, he continues, the historian must fashion the real events into narrative forms and use literary devices, a process which has contradictory effects: coaxing real events into narrative gives them meaning or "truth," which implies a moral stance; but the history loses objectivity due to this moral bias (17). Another stipulation of White's theory is that "it is not enough that a historical account deal in real, rather than merely imaginary, events...[and] the events must be not only registered within the chronological framework of their original occurrence but narrated as well, that is to say, revealed as possessing a structure, an order of meaning" (5). Here, White emphasizes that a historical account must not only reflect the sequence of real events in time, but the events must be given a sense of "meaning" that explains causality.

In *Aspects of the Novel*, Forester supplements White's theory by outlining narrative techniques used in literature to create meaning. Thus he provides useful definitions for analyzing how literary techniques operate in *The Jungle* to give it the moral meaning White requires of historical writing. In his book Forester clarifies the difference between a story and plot, and their relationship to causality. He explains that, "a story [is] a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality...the time sequence is preserved" (86). Thus, going back to White's theory, a true history must have plot: it preserves the chronological order of events as they happen in real life, while the

explanation of causality provides meaning, thereby meeting White's guidelines.

The last two paragraphs of chapter twelve in *The Jungle* are representative of Sinclair's use of both fictional and historical elements, and thus provide good material for defining how history and fiction coexist in the novel as specified by the theories of White and Forester. One element of this passage that is pertinent to the discussion of history versus fictional narrativity is its use of imaginary events: they disqualify the novel from the genre of historical narrative, and they reflect the difficulty of making real events "speak themselves" (White 4). So immediately, the imaginary events of these paragraphs—the story of Jurgis's life—prevent *The Jungle* from being a historical narrative and classify the novel as a literary narrative, as according to White—a stipulation that is common sense. In this section, the imaginary events are used to give a context for the historical events—the laws regarding work related injuries and the data on average wages—which supports White's claim that real events do not present themselves as an insightful, meaningful narrative. For instance, the historical information reads that when a man is injured,

He would get his place back only by courtesy of the boss. To this there was no exception, save when the accident was one for which the firm was liable; in that case they would send a slippery lawyer to see him, first to try to sign away his claims, but if he was too smart for that, to promise him that [he] should always be provided with work. This promise they would keep, strictly and to the letter – for two years. Two years as the 'statute of limitations' (150).

This historical information taken alone shows that when a worker is injured, the company has a limited obligation to keep the worker employed; it does not “speak by itself” and assume a moral stance. Rather, a meaning to these historical facts forms when placed in the context of the novel’s imaginary events and literary, or narrative, devices are used. Thus, Sinclair’s use of imaginary events and devices common to literary narrative highlights White’s point that real events do not have implicit meaning; using White’s language, real events must be “coaxed” and “fashioned” into narrative to provide “truth.”

Sinclair’s use of forms common to literature to make the real events of these paragraphs “speak” parallels White’s idea that in order for history to have a coherent meaning or “truth,” elements of narrativity must be present. The narrator, who is of course is an element of narrativity, provides a clear moral stance on the historical data: he exclaims that an injured worker’s legal rights inflict unfair physical stress on the worker, since they have no choice but to accept dangerous lest they should fall into poverty; the narrator focuses upon the imaginary events of Jurgis’s life. Also, since the narrator has a third person omniscient viewpoint, he can see into Jurgis’s thoughts, thoughts which Sinclair also uses to rebuke the packers. Sinclair writes:

The peculiar bitterness of all this was that Jurgis saw so plainly the meaning of it, In the beginning he had been fresh and strong...but now he was second-hand, a damaged article, so to speak, and they did not want him.

They had got the best out of him – they had worn him out, with their speeding-up an their carelessness, and now they had thrown him away!

(149)

Here Jurgis's suffering, revealed by his thoughts about how the packers have used his all his energy and left him to struggle without work, shows Sinclair's moral stance on the packing factories in Chicago. Also, Sinclair uses the narrator to voice opinions: the narrator's exclamation expresses Sinclair's feeling that the treatment of workers is not fair. Thus, imaginary events and a narrator, tools of literary narrative, work to make *The Jungle* meet qualifications of historical narrative. In summary, the key points of White's theory on historical writing work off of each other: real events do not make sense or "speak" for themselves without narrative elements; and an account of reality does not qualify as a historical narrative unless it possesses a moral basis or purpose, which literary elements provide.

Forester's discussion of how literary narratives achieve a plot also shows how elements common to fiction work in *The Jungle* to give it the qualities that White argue define historical narrative. In the excerpt quoted above that explains the moral stance of Jurgis and the narrator, Sinclair establishes causality, the key element of plot: although the causality is between imaginary and real events, he establishes the connection that the laws cause Jurgis's suffering because they are unjust. This is a more intellectual process than merely listing the events as they happen in time, which Forester defines as the "story" of a narrative. Rather, Sinclair shows why the laws lead to suffering, thereby establishing plot. Thus, plot is a literary device that is used in historical narratives to provide the meaning or "truth" that White discusses. Furthermore, the plot in this section of the novel meets White's requirement that a historical writing must present events "within the chronological framework of their original occurrence" (5) while also providing

meaning. Although these events in the novel are presented in reverse chronological order—the audience is first told that Jurgis is stuck without work, and afterwards learns about the laws on injured workers—it is discernable that the laws were put into place before Jurgis's hardship. This comparison between Forester's definition of plot and White's theory on historical writing shows how elements of both literary and historical narrative overlap in *The Jungle*.

It is reasonable to say that the status of *The Jungle* as a historical or fictional work is difficult to recognize at first because elements of both genres form a complex relationship in the novel. White and Forester help clarify this relationship, arguing that some elements such as imaginary events belong solely in the genre of fictional literature, many literary devices create an overlap between fiction and history. *The Jungle* is very close to meeting all the requirements of historical narrative—only imaginary events set it back. However, since the fictional events are of the genre Realism, they are as close as possible to being real events, thus making the novel as close as possible to a historical narrative.

Works Cited

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