

# The (literal) jungle: symbolism and meaning in sinclair's narrative

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Charles Darwin put forward the idea that nature showed prevalent consistency in a pattern of “survival of the fittest.” In the classic realist novel *The Jungle*, this concept is also present throughout the entirety of the story. The narrative of a man named Jurgis avidly attempting to make a living for himself in America, this novel plays upon the very idea of survival of the fittest, and it also emphasizes the fact that society, much like nature itself, functions very similar to a literal jungle as opposed to the common belief that society is very “civilized.” Through symbolism, characterization, setting, diction, and specific scenes in the novel *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair effectively portrays the world and society as a whole as functioning much like an actual jungle.

Numerous symbols are used in Sinclair’s novel *The Jungle*. To begin, an emphasis on actual animals begins on page 39, where it is being explained, regarding industry, how “They brought in ten thousand head of cattle every day, and as many hogs, and half as many sheep. . .” Animals are then prevalent throughout the rest of the novel, and human beings are reflected as being treated similar to these animals later on in the story. The first of these places is early on in the story on page 41 where Jurgis is witnessing the slaughtering of the hogs. “Each one of these hogs was a separate creature. Some were white hogs, some were black; some were brown, some were spotted; some were old, some were young; some were long and lean, some were monstrous. And each of them had an individuality of his own, a will of his own, a hope and a heart’s desire. . .” This passage sets up the rest of the book for the comparison of humans and animals. The different kinds of hogs are representative of the many different kinds of humans there are.

Some people are tall, some are short; some are black, some are white; some are old, some are young. Each human has an individuality of his or her own as well that should be valued and recognized. The author presents this passage to effectively and early on set up the idea that humans are not so different from animals at all and to later make the point that it is horribly wrong to treat humans as if they were disposable animals.

Sinclair furthers this comparison of humans to animals throughout the rest of the novel by showing how people are often times treated like animals as well. Page 81 reads “ The new hands were here by the thousands. All day long the gates of the packing-houses were besieged by starving and penniless men; they came, literally, by the thousands every single morning, fighting with each other for a chance for life . . . The Durham’s bosses picked out twenty of the biggest. . .” At this point in the story, the author is describing how, just like animals or cattle, people would come to these packing-houses in search of a means of work, and they would fight with one another much like animals do in order to get what they wanted. However, much like the cattle that are emphasized so often in this novel, only the biggest and strongest are chosen to have the chance to make a living, which is reflective of Darwin’s “ survival of the fittest” which is typically thought of as something that really only goes on in nature or the jungle. Furthermore, page 154 offers the knowledge that Jurgis has been “ flung aside, like a bit of trash, the carcass of some animal” showing how society has weakened him and thrown him out as if he were rotten meat, and Sinclair uses the word “ cowed” on page 55 as precise diction to reflect how Jurgis and his family

have been intimidated by the way society is run as well as yet again remind the reader of the animal itself. Nearer to the end of the story, Sinclair ends his subtle comparisons of humans and animals, and on page 256 comes right out and exclaims the idea to the reader: “ You went out of here like cattle, and like cattle you’ll come back!” This suddenly makes it all very plain to the reader that humans are often treated as if they are animals and behave as such as well. Also, since animals are dependent upon certain things as humans are, they will return to where ever it is that will provide them with some hope of a means of survival. This dependence reflects the idea of “ survival of the fittest” because the people who may not be so “ fit” return to something that is in order to find a way to survive. This same device is used on page 257 where it is stated that “ they were herded into the packing-plants like sheep,” and on page 263 it says, “ He was crippled – he was as literally crippled as any wild animal which has lost its claw, or had been torn out of its shell.” In these comparisons, the reader is reminded that society many times functions like the brutal world of the jungle, and that humans sometimes have so few options that to be treated as if one were an animal might be the difference between life and death. However, one’s attempts to survive in this “ urban jungle” are often times futile and a person is chewed up and spit back out only to find that they were merely the prey of another animal.

Another major symbol in the novel *The Jungle* is the prevalence of the “ machine.” The industrial machine in corporate America is presented on page 46. At this point in the story, Jurgis is feeling awestruck in the idea that he is

“ part of it all” and has become a cog in this enormous monster of an industry. Though machines are very separate from jungles, they can still in fact represent the idea that society functions as a jungle. Jurgis is awestruck that he is part of a machine, a “ cog” in the industry, but he doesn’t realize that cogs and gears can be easily replaced in a machine, so in order to maintain his place in this machine, he must work against everyone else in order to survive. In a jungle, it is more or less every creature for his or herself, a competition for survival, and this idea of a machine with removable and replaceable parts creates this competition for human beings to look out for themselves so that they do not get removed from this machine and can survive. However, the bosses at these packing-plants are aware that the “ cogs” in this machine are disposable and replaceable, so they work the laborers to the bone until they can’t work anymore. These laborers are indeed like the cogs in the machine because when they are worked hard enough and treated poorly and abused, they will wear out and will need to be replaced. This keeps the competition for survival going, something that is very abundant in the jungle.

Sinclair establishes this theme of society functioning similar to a jungle through specific characterization of certain individuals in the story. Jurgis is first off described as someone rather strong and well prepared for anything on page 14, and on page 37 it is stated that “ He had gone to Brown’s and stood there not more than half an hour before one of the bosses noticed his form towering above the rest.” When this idea is thought of in terms of animals and how Jurgis compares to everyone else (the other “ animals”) in

this novel, this description implies that Jurgis is one of the “fit” animals in the jungle who will be able to survive because of his large figure and strength. Then, on page 147, Jurgis is compared to a tiger, a creature that is often considered dominant, powerful, and fierce in the world of nature. It states, “He fought like a tiger, writhing and twisting, half flinging them off, and starting toward his unconscious enemy.” At this particular point in the story, both the author’s depiction of a scene and Jurgis’ character reflect the idea that society functions like a jungle. Jurgis has become a tiger, and having been recently upset by something somebody has done, has attacked that person just as an animal might attack another if they are angered. Along with this, the author plays upon the idea that it is the packing-houses and the bosses that work there that are actually the predators in this novel who prey on the weaker animals such as the laborers and the poverty stricken immigrants, and deceit appears to be their tactic of choice.

Lastly, the setting itself that Sinclair has presented seems to represent that of an “urban jungle.” Page 17 sets a rather chaotic mood during the celebration where there is music, dancing, “thieve-like” activity of some of the guests, and general commotion that occurs. This reflects how a jungle is always full of activity – chaos – and is never truly peaceful. Creatures are always moving about, birds are always singing, thieve-like animals are waiting to pounce on their prey or rob a meal (or even a life) from another animal, and there is a feel of constant life and subtle chaos. Later on, on page 32 and 33, the family is approaching the city and the reader is told how the landscape changes drastically. “It grew darker all the time” and there

were “ half a dozen chimneys, tall as the tallest of buildings, touching the very sky – and leaping from them half a dozen columns of smoke, thick, oily, and black as night.” The jungle is a very dark place, and the buildings seem to mirror the towering trees in a jungle that surround everything, touching the very sky. Trees are the most prevalent thing in a jungle and are the things that provide the boundaries for the jungle, much like how the imposing building that are described by the author set the boundaries for this “ urban jungle” and are a distinct characteristic of it as well. Though it is not a perfect description of a literal jungle, Sinclair has effectively implanted into the setting of the story the daunting and mysterious structure of a thick and dark “ urban” jungle that is full of activity and nearly isolated from the outside world. As well as the city itself being compared to a jungle, the meat packing-plants are described somewhat like a jungle as well. Pages 98 and 99 deftly describe the diseases that exist inside the packing-plants that the workers all must try to avoid and be wary of, which could be similar to all of the dangerous things in a jungle that an animal would have to cautious and wary of as well.

In a jungle, there are many types of predators and poisonous things that one must look out for, so this detail becomes important in setting the feeling that a person working in a packing-plant must be just as wary of all the things that could harm him or her as if he or she were in an actual jungle. Page 81 also states that the air in the packing-houses was “ full of steam, from the hot water and the hot blood, so that you could not see five feet before you. . .” Jungles are often times described as being “ steamy,” and Sinclair’s

incorporation of this characteristic of the packing-houses suggests the similarity between the steamy jungle and the packing-plants. This description is one that gives a subtle feel of “mystery” and danger in the packing-plant which is comparable to the mystery and danger that exists in a real jungle as well as the physical feel of the hot steam that would be present in one. Also on page 254, it is told that the workers at the packing-houses were “half fainting for the tropical heat. . .” Sinclair portrays yet again that the setting in the packing-houses is similar to a jungle due to the seemingly “tropical” climate that exists there. It was not simply “hot” in the packing-houses, it was a “tropical heat” which is a very specific word choice that contributes to the feeling that these houses and, more specifically, the society that runs these houses, literally feels as well as functions more like a jungle. The author has created the feeling that these “jungle” houses are the territory and domain of the predator bosses (much like how animals sometimes have a specific territory) who prey on the laborers to make a living, reflecting on society itself because it is society, more specifically industrial America, that has constructed these jungles in which the cunning and sly “predators” lure in their “prey.”

Though modern civilization is not particularly present in a jungle, Sinclair has effectively presented the idea that society functions as if it were a jungle itself. Sinclair shows his readers how certain characteristics are similar to those of animals when it comes to survival and that people are often times treated like animals in society, especially in corporate America where it seems as if people with authoritative power are predators who deceive the



weak and prey on laborers for a profit. Sinclair grasps the reader with his outstanding comparisons of humans to animals in the idea that each one is unique and has a will of its own and uses these comparisons to construct the theme that society functions more like a jungle than most people think it does. By even simply titling his novel *The Jungle*, the author effectively manages to remind the reader that society, especially corporate society in the industrial parts of America, is corrupt and has many characteristics of an actual jungle, and Darwin's "survival of the fittest" is prevalent in urban society as well as the wild.