**Of Sound Body: Physical Well-Being in *The Jungle***

# Introduction: Humans’ most innate instinct is for survival, preservation of bodily wellness.

* 1. Therefore, when humans are driven to forgo or overcome this basic impulse, there must be a strong external force to push someone over this threshold.
  2. Upton Sinclair explores this threshold again and again as Jurgis, his family, and various others come upon misfortune and are forced to give up their well-being—whether temporarily or permanently—in a quest for this mirage of the American dream.
  3. These revelatory engagements are embodied in three major aspects in *The Jungle*:
     1. The physical ailments that reveal their stakes
     2. The responses to being unwell that reveals their psyche
     3. The emotional desensitization to death and injury that permeates the novel

1. **First, the physical**
   1. Having been effectively trapped in the Chicago industrial machine, Sinclair’s characters give up their well-being for an ideal, a duty, a wage; thereby revealing their stakes and priorities.
      1. First introduced with Mikolas in the opening wedding scene (a stark contrast to the seeming-festivities): “He is a beef-boner, and that is a dangerous trade, especially when you are on piecework and trying to earn a bride. [. . .] the cut may heal, but you never can tell” (9)
         1. Introduces and explores the cost of this dangerous work and the reasons why he must continue.
            1. Expanded upon in a description of all sorts of jobs: “The hands of these men would be criss-crossed with cuts, until you could no longer pretend to count them or to trace them. They would have no nails,--they had worn them off pulling hides; their knuckles were swollen so that their fingers spread out like a fan” (82)
            2. Enduring physical consequences that are generalized to the population because they, like Jurgis and his family, have the highest of stakes: the potential to rise up the ranks.
         2. Representation of all the work-related hazards, significant injuries that are simply a part of life in America for these foreigners.
      2. The instinct to stop doing what hurts is demonstrated by Stanislovas: “little Stanislovas conceived a terror of the cold that was almost a mania. Every morning, when it came time to start for the yards, he would begin to cry and protest. Nobody knew quite how to manage him, for threats did no good” (66-67).
         1. Yet, Stanislovas continues to place risk upon himself, not only for the obvious (the income), but also for a sense of duty. The child may be scared, but he ultimately submits and goes with Jurgis—sometimes even bearing even more cold, but Stanislovas chooses to wait in the cold because contributing to the unit is how he contributes
      3. The purely physical ailments come to a head with Jurgis’s ankle, the impetus, the derailing, the downfall.
         1. “At first he hardly noticed it, it was such a slight accident—simply that in leaping out of the way he turned his ankle. There was a twinge of pain, but Jurgis was used to pain, and he did not coddle himself” becomes far more problematic as he pushes himself to continue his work, to assuage this “awful terror in his soul,” to make this ideal of becoming established in America come to fruition (95, 96).
         2. This one instance becomes a turning point; the incident transcends temporary bounds that can be healed and spirals into a series of misfortunes.
         3. The stakes were high, and Jurgis’s accident slowly unravels each one of those investments.
2. **The responses**
   1. In the reactions to these primary, physical injuries, the arc of hope to dismal despair becomes more and more prominent as futility and desperation dominate them.
      1. As a baseline with which to compare: although the opening scene actually takes place after Jurgis has attempted to settle in to Chicago, this is still a reader’s first impression and his catch phrase first comes to light: “leave it to me. I will earn more money—I will work harder” (17).
         1. A stark contrast to the hopelessness and defeat that comes to embody Jurgis later on in the novel.
      2. The normal response to most bodily harm would be to call a doctor: “The family, wild with terror, sent for a doctor, and paid half a dollar to be told that there was nothing to be done” (65). The lack of health care infrastructure comes at an unexpectedly high cost.
         1. This futility contributes to the sense of decline.
      3. This “nothing to be done” attitude thoroughly impacts Jurgis as it goes against what he believes to be true about America: work hard and things will pay off. “it was almost maddening for a strong man like him, a fighter, to have to lie there helpless on his back. It was for all the world the old story of Prometheus bounds” (96).
         1. The physical limitations seem to pile up in a time when every moment of work counts.
      4. This transforms into a strange stubbornness, an insistence that work to be done is a future to be made, even at the expense of a child’s well-being.
         1. “till Jurgis flew into a passion of nervous rage and swore like a madman, declaring that he would kill [Stanslovas] if he did not stop [crying] (99).
         2. Even when he is unable to do anything, Jurgis’s psyche transforms into an obsession for word: “looking as if he wanted to break through the grating. ‘You little villain,’ he cried, ‘you didn’t try!’ ‘I did—I did!’ wailed Stanislovas, shrinking from him in terror” (141).
      5. Jurgis applies this same logic to the duty of doctors and the like—making empty promises out of desperation.
         1. “’But you understand now—you vill pay me de rest of twenty-five dollars soon?’ ‘As soon as I can.’ ‘Some time dis mont’?’ ‘Yes, within a month,” (153).
            1. And, as this last-ditch effort to save Ona fails, Jurgis as well falls into the emotional deficiency that manifests itself as desensitization.
3. **Finally, the emotional**
   1. As the deaths and deformities and decay grow, the final defeat is in Jurgis’s and his now-scattered family’s hopelessness and the casual attitude to death that they adopt.
      1. Before Jurgis’s total helplessness, his emotional responses are pathic and seem to match the gravity of the situation: “it was as if the pillars of his soul had fallen in—he was blasted with horror” (149-150).
         1. He goes on to grieve in a very pronounced, loud manner.
      2. And after Chicago has worn him down, he begins to push these empathic responses away: “Jurgis took the news in a peculiar way. He turned deadly pale, but he caught himself, and for half a minute stood in the middle of the room, clenching his hands tightly and setting his teeth. Then he pushed Aniele aside and strode into the next room and climbed the ladder” (175).
         1. The death and decay of those around him become something to forget, to try and bury. It reveals a total giving up of hope. Death is simply another aspect of Chicago for Jurgis now. Losing people is the norm, not working to provide a better life for those same people.
      3. This spreads beyond Jurgis as well. Marija, when found after Jurgis’s many endeavors, flippantly discusses the total disarray and disaster that has struck them in Jurgis’s absence.
         1. “’How should I know?’ she said. ‘I haven’t seen him for over a year. He got blood poisoning and lost one finger, and couldn’t play the violin any more; and then he went away’” (243).
         2. “’And then Stanislovas died—‘ ‘Stanislovas dead!’ ‘Yes,’ said Marija, ‘I forgot. You didn’t know about it’,” (242).
      4. When the stakes were high, Jurgis and those with him were willing to give up anything for that possibility for a better life. Now, the stakes are still high, but their tenacity has worn away. They’ve submitted to this existence of loss. The transformation completes; from working hard to pay for a house to accepting the pain and frailty of what they have or once had.
4. **Conclusion: *The Jungle* is a reflection of humans pushed to their very limit.**
   1. As their health (in physical, mental, and emotional manifestation) declines, they also shed their hope, their tenacity, their American dream.
   2. Depending on what one’s definition of humanity is, they seem to lose some semblance of it. Whether it be a loss of the ability to work, to progress; a loss of the ability to make choices; a loss of the ability to empathize—they all fall apart as they are stretched to the very brink of existence.