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

Sociologically, biologically, and psychologically, our most human, innate instinct is for survival, and for the preservation of bodily wellness in keeping that survival. This manifests itself as an intense motivator and as a guiding force. Therefore, when humans are driven to forgo or overcome this basic impulse, there must be an exceptionally stronger external force to push someone over this threshold. Upton Sinclair explores this threshold again and again as Jurgis, his family, and various others come upon misfortune and malady in Chicago, forcing them to give up their well-being—whether temporarily or permanently—in a quest for this mirage of the American dream. These revelatory engagements are embodied in three major aspects in *The Jungle*: their physical ailments, their immediate responses to being unwell, and the emotional desensitization to death and injury that eventually permeates the novel.

Having been effectively trapped in the Chicago industrial machine, Sinclair’s characters readily give up their well-being for a wage, a duty, an ideal. This phenomenon is first introduced in the opening scene of the novel—a festive wedding that is dramatically punctuated by a description of Mikolas as a “beef-boner” which “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). In conjunction with the downright horror with which Sinclair describes “the hands of these men [which] would be criss-crossed with cuts” comes an acceptance (82). Mikolas suffers horrendously, but continues to endure for this nebulous potential to rise up the ranks. This first mention is a generalized representation of the various work-related hazards described in the novel, the significant injuries that are just another part of working life in America. Mikolas, Jurgis, and the rest of the Lithuanian immigrants buy into this attitude of martyrdom, of exchanging suffering for the possibility of owning a home, providing for their families, moving up the social ladder. This long-term benefit may (at this point in the novel) seem viable, but requires forethought and optimism. The primal instinct to simply stop work that causes bodily harm is demonstrated by Stanislovas as he “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). Perhaps owing to his age and his innocence, Stanislovas embodies the simple inclination to resist anguish. Yet, Stanislovas continues to place risk upon himself, to venture out into the cold for a sense of duty. The child may be scared, but he ultimately submits to going to the yards with Jurgis to contribute to the greater good of everyone in the unit. Whether the American ideal is a pipe dream or not, they retain hope. The possible upward mobility, some semblance of a comfortable life, or even just belonging to a functioning family seem like causes worth trudging through misery for. However, these physical ailments come to a head with Jurgis’s ankle injury, which transforms the trajectory of their lives, serving as an impetus to downfall. Jurgis continuously grinds away because it seems like the proper course of action; but, ultimately, this continuous degradation of his self-preservation becomes disastrous because “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” (95). The previous tolerance he has built up (that once was perhaps naïve, but admirable) becomes foolhardy as he pushes himself to continue his work, to assuage this “awful terror in his soul” of failure (96). This particular incident transcends temporary bounds; although Jurgis’s ankle eventually heals, his life spirals into a series of misfortunes. Jurgis’s accident slowly unravels each of his investments, the stakes for which he and his family have worked.

In the reactions to these primary, physical injuries, the arc of dismal despair becomes more and more prominent as futility and desperation dominate their actions. First, as a baseline with which to compare, Jurgis’s mantra of “leave it to me. I will earn more money—I will work harder” plays a prominent role in the opening chapters, defining their initial hope, in stark contrast to the hopelessness and defeat that comes to embody them in the future. As the work and the city frays them, Jurgis’s clan becomes more frantic and their circumstances more dire. In one instance, Jurgis responds logically to illness by calling a doctor, but when “the family, wild with terror, sent for a doctor, [they] paid half a dollar to be told that there was nothing to be done” (65). The cost of this call is more than the fifty cents that they lose (although that is a sizable amount for them); they lose faith in their own work. This “nothing to be done” attitude thoroughly impacts Jurgis as it contradicts what he believed to be true about America: work hard and affairs will fall into place. This realization is made tangible by the conflict between Jurgis’s body and mind as he is forced to stop working after injuring himself. He thinks “it [. . .] 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 bound” (96). His physical being sums up the futility, the dissonance between the ingrained impulse that work will save them and the sudden revelation that it may all be for naught. This idle ineffectuality transforms into a strange stubbornness, an insistence that work to be done is a future to be made, a desperation that drives Jurgis from that point on. His madness even eliminates any commitment he had to preserve the innocence and well-being of children. As his endurance breaks, he becomes vicious, flying “into a passion of nervous rage and [swearing] like a madman, declaring that he would kill [Stanislovas] if he did not stop [crying]” (99). Jurgis projects his frustration and anger on Stanislovas, dramatically scapegoating him and throwing the weight of their world upon this child’s shoulders. Even when Jurgis is detained, unable to contribute at all to the well-being of his loved ones, he is desperate for someone to do work, “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). Jurgis also digs himself into debt in desperation. He makes empty promises in a last-ditch effort to save Ona—when asked if he “vill pay [. . .] de rest of twenty-five dollars soon,” Jurgis quickly responds, “Yes, within a month,” knowing this to be an impossibility (153). But, as even this final chance fails, Jurgis falls into the emotional deficiency that manifests itself as desensitization.

As the deaths and deformities and decay grow in number, the final defeat is in Jurgis’s and his now-scattered family’s hopelessness and the casual attitude to death that they adopt. Before, Jurgis’s emotional responses are impassioned and match the gravity of the situation. After Ona dies, Jurgis feels “as if the pillars of his soul had fallen in—he was blasted with horror” (149-150). He then goes on to grieve in a very pronounced, loud manner. However, after his life and circumstances have worn him down, he begins to push these empathic responses further and further away. After Antanas’s death, “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” (175). The deaths of those around him become something to repress, to bury. Death is simply another aspect of Chicago for Jurgis. The American dream was working to provide a better life for his family; the American reality turned out to be losing those same people. However, this flippant attitude spreads beyond Jurgis. Marija, when finally found after Jurgis’s many attempts to come back home, easily discusses the total disarray and disaster that has struck them in Jurgis’s absence. When asked where Tamoszius has gone, she responds with cool cruelty, “How should I know? [. . .] 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). And, again, when Jurgis expresses shock at finding Stanislovas has died, she curtly states, “I forgot. You didn’t know about it” (242). When the stakes were high for Jurgis and all the others, they were willing to give up anything for that possibility of a better life. It seemed possible (or even probable) that they could live in a house, feed all their family members, become upstanding citizens. But now, while the stakes are still just as high, their tenacity has worn away. They’ve submitted to this existence that is filled with loss. Chicago has transformed them. They turn away from working hard and turn toward accepting the frailty and tenuousness of the life they lead.

As the immigrants’ health (in physical, mental, and emotional modes) declines, they also shed their hope, their grit, their American dream. From their very first night in Chicago, they are stretched beyond comfort. And, as they are pushed to the very brink of existence, they seem to lose some semblance of humanity. They lose their ability to progress, their ability to make rational choices, their ability to empathize. Sinclair represents this vacuum of hope and vision through their very immediate, dominant, physical needs—stripping them of their well-being and their care for others’ well-being. This primal law of survival may rule in the wild, but in the jungles of Chicago, the manipulation of this inclination is what leads to their downfall.