

Sample Essay 2: History or Literature

Grade and comment on this paper, which is a final draft of an essay examining a theme found in the novel *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair. The student chose the theme and developed it in consultation with you and with classmates. In your comments, focus on 1) which elements of the paper support the grade it was given, 2) the development and support of the student's chosen theme, 3) the use and integration of quotations as support, and 4) issues in grammar and usage.

Dehumanization in Laissez-Faire Capitalist World

In Upton Sinclair's turn-of-the-century novel, *The Jungle*, human lives parallel with animals and commodities. Sinclair uses vivid descriptions and metaphor to create a space in which people are driven by laissez-faire capitalism to compete for survival. Sinclair uses various types of metaphor to dehumanize the working class people and develop a ruthless Darwinism world in order to promote his belief-Socialism. The poor working people use every bit of strength in order to carry on; however, their effort is not always responded. By describing the depressing life of Jurgis, the protagonist of this novel, and his family, Sinclair reveals the ugly side of capitalism. According to Darwin's theory, "survival of the fittest" is the principle of animal evolution. In *The Jungle*, these working-class people associate with animals for they endlessly compete and fight for living. Their living and working conditions, in the readers' eyes, are considered awful; they work slavishly like animals, yet are even unable to achieve what they dream of. Living appears to be a luxury for these poor workers; their American dream is deformed.

To make the capitalist society into a competitive and ruthless Darwinism jungle, the most often used metaphor in *The Jungle* is animal. Sinclair parallels the workers with weak creatures or rough beasts to dehumanize them and make the readers treat them with extra sympathy. "... .. he [Jurgis] lived like a dumb beast of burden, knowing only the moment in which he was"(140). "Then Jurgis fought like a wild beast"(202). "Jurgis lifted up his head and began to sniff the air like a startled animal-scenting the far-off odor of home"(174). By associating Jurgis with beast, Sinclair takes away humanity from this character and makes Jurgis become merely a struggling creature that uses its primitive instincts to live. On the other hand,

dehumanization functions to show these poor people's struggling and persistence in this merciless world.

Elzbieta was one of the primitive creatures: like the angleworm, which goes on living though cut in half; like a hen, which, deprived of her chickens one by one, will mother the last that is left her. She did this because it was her nature-she asked no questions about the justice of it, nor the worthwhileness of life in which destruction and death ran riot(193).

Elzbieta survives and persists like an angleworm or a hen that accepts the torturous reality without questioning the meaning of life nor speaking for her dignity. Sinclair associates these characters with inhuman activities; here, he shows a depressed aspect of their lives that the only element left is the hope to carry on. In addition to being like animals, these characters are sometimes even lower than ordinary animals as Sinclair describes. "And now here he [Old Antanas] was, worn out in soul and body, and with no more place in the world than a sick dog"(58). By comparing Old Antanas, Jurgis' father, with a sick dog, Sinclair portrays a scene of a pathetic old man with no strength and ability who has merely the value of a sick dog in this capitalist system.

Over and above being nonhuman, these people are trapped, and preys of strong and powerful ones in the capitalist society. "They were like rats in a trap, that was the truth; and more of them were piling in every day"(66). Immigrating to the United States, these people believe in American dream; nevertheless, by coming here, they on the contrary become trapped and helpless in this capitalist nation. "All of these things had worked together for the company that had marked them for its prey and was waiting for its chance"(178). Wild animals in the jungle probably have more rights and opportunities than the characters in *The Jungle*; these poor working people are trapped, unable to move, and waiting for the predators to consume them. Their situation is even inferior to the wild animals' for the workers are not capable to govern their own lives and be the masters of themselves. Sinclair portrays a merciless meat-packing industry for both the slaughtered animals and people working there. Similar to the animals killed and sale in Packingtown, the people working there have no control

over their own happiness, choices, and even their lives. Hardworking does not promise them a comfort life or even survival; they simply have no power over what they deserve for the price they pay.

In addition to all their physical hardships, there was thus a constant strain upon their minds; they were harried all day and nearly all night by worry and fear. This was in truth not living; it was scarcely even existing, and they felt that it was too little for the price they paid. They were willing to work all the time; and when people did their best, ought not to be able to keep alive(100)?

Existing appears to be a luxury for them, and some of them do not even achieve this simple dream by having done their best. Sinclair depicts the sense of helplessness among these workers with the intention to lead the readers to believe the flaws in capitalism; furthermore, the advantage of socialism.

In this merciless world Sinclair describes, the working people's lives are vulnerable and always depended upon stronger and more powerful ones. Resembling Darwin's theory-survival of the fittest-animal evolution root in cruel competition and the adaptation to the environment. Sinclair uses the analogy of trees in the forest to suggest an unkind force of nature that eliminate the unfit ones.

Now, the dreadful winter was come upon them. In the forests, all summer long, the branches of the trees do battle for light, and some of them lose and die; and then come the raging blasts, and the storms of snow and hail, and strew the ground with these weaker branches. Just so it was in Packingtown; the whole district braced itself for the struggle that was an agony, and those whose time was come died off in hordes(78).

According to the "stern system of nature"(218), the weaker ones fail the trials given by the capitalist society and "die off of cold and hunger"(218). Sinclair shows a ruthless law of the jungle where the weak are the prey of the strong; the intentional effects of this inhuman world he creates link to Sinclair's belief of socialism again. For socialism provides each person equal

opportunity to work and pursuit desires, Sinclair reveals the ugliest side of laissez-faire capitalism to lead the readers away from what he objects.

The workers in Sinclair's *The Jungle* are creatures forced to a stage that they become numb and ask for nothing except existing. The intensive cruel world take away sentiments, feelings, or humanity from these characters, and what left are physical bodies, which still need constant working in exchange of existing. Sinclair sometimes no longer compares the workers in this novel to living beings; instead, they resemble objects, machines, commodities. "... .. watched the men on the killing beds, marveling at their speed and power as if they had been wonderful machines" (56). The men working on the killing beds operate within an assembly line as screws to a machine; their lack of identity and dignity does not affect the efficiency of job performing because any stronger person can replace any one of them immediately when somebody leaves this mechanism. "She [Elzbieta] was part of the machine she tended, and every faculty that was not needed for the machine was doomed to be crushed out of existence"(135). As Sinclair tries to show here, the society resembles a huge industry and humans' values equate to how suitable they can perform as a machine; the world will obliterate the existence of any unneeded or malfunctioned parts.

... but now he [Jurgis] was second-hand, a damaged article, so to speak, and they did not want him. They had got the best of him-they had worn him out, with their speeding-up and their carelessness, and now they had thrown his away! The vast majority, however, were simply the worn-out parts of the great merciless packing machine; they had toiled there, and kept up with the pace, some of them for ten or twenty years, until finally the time had come when they could not keep up with it any more (124).

People are exhausted and used up in this system;

... .. women's bodies and men's souls, were for sale in the marketplace, and human beings writhed and fought and fell upon each other like wolves in a pit; in which lusts were raging fires, and men were fuel, and humanity was festering and stewing and wallowing in its own corruption(165).

Humans turn into commodities that may be for sale, exchange, and discard in the marketplace. In this city described in *The Jungle*, humanity is abolished to facilitate the self-interested system of capitalist world. Sinclair carves capitalism as practicality and utilitarianism in which the frail ones become unsuitable to exist in this scheme.

In the middle of this novel, Sinclair makes the characters conscious of the dehumanization when Jurgis and Ona struggle to provide their baby "human possibility" in this world.

It was such a responsibility—they must not have the baby grow up to suffer as they had. And this indeed had been the first thing that Jurgis had thought of himself—he had clenched his hands and braced himself anew for the struggle, for the sake of that tiny mite of human possibility(108).

As the readers become conscious along with the characters, Sinclair conveys clear message that capitalism allows dehumanization of these poor people. When the protagonist, Jurgis, develops into a socialism devotee at the end of this novel, Sinclair intends to have the readers accompany Jurgis and share his passion. Capitalism and socialism always oppose each other and cannot coexist. With the purpose of promoting socialism, Sinclair uses two-third of this novel to portray the awful condition of Packingtown workers whose American dream is deformed, and socialism becomes the only promising way to help them out. Combining the faithful description on the reality of these workers' situation and the expression of the author's personal grief, Sinclair gradually leads the readers to disprove capitalism and support what he believes—Socialism.