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Teaching Upton Sinclair's

The Jungle

from

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General Introduction to the Work

Upton Sinclair

UPTON BEALL SINCLAIR, JR. (1878 – 1968) was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on September 20, 1878, to Upton Beall Sinclair and Priscilla Harden.

Priscilla's father was a wealthy businessman involved with the Western Maryland Railroad. Upton, Sr.'s, father came from a distinguished line of naval officers, but he himself lacked drive. He was a clothing salesman for a time and then became a seller of liquors.

The elder Sinclair became an alcoholic and moved his wife and son to New York City in 1888 to escape the scrutiny of respectable family. While Upton, Jr., was young, the family subsisted in a series of boardinghouses.

Upton Jr., often spent time with his wealthy grandparents. Sinclair was a religious boy and a lover of literature. His heroes were Jesus Christ and Percy Bysshe Shelley. One of his favorite books was *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan.

He was an avid learner and, at fourteen years old, entered the New York City College. By seventeen, Sinclair had published his first story in a national magazine and was writing for newspapers and magazines. He earned about \$40.00 per week, enough money to live on his own.

Sinclair graduated from college in time to take part in the Spanish–American War. He was patriotic and proud of his naval heritage.

Sinclair was committed to remaining a virgin until he was married. He threw himself into his interests: studies, violin, writing. Religion was an important factor in his decisions, but the rational powers of analysis and his belief that he was quite capable of spiritual insight kept him from embracing God as preached by the Church. Instead, he embraced Henry David Thoreau's Transcendentalist philosophy that an ideal spiritual state transcended the physical realm. One achieved insight by personal intuition rather than religious doctrine.

In the summer of 1900, Sinclair maintained a romance with Meta Fuller, a young girl he had known since he was thirteen. Meta's wealthy southern heritage resembled his, and like Sinclair, she had spent much of her life living in a boarding house. Although Sinclair was falling in love, he warned Meta that, as a true artist, he must be a monomaniac, having obsessive zeal for only a single thing: his writing. He said, "I do not believe I am a kind man. I have no patience with human hearts, their suffering and their weakness. There is only one thing that I value and that is my fidelity to my ideal." Later he said, "God made me for an artist and not for a lover!" If he were to marry, he felt it would be to *perfect* the woman, not to *love* her.

Formalist Approach Applied to *The Jungle*



Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.



Activity One

Examining the Contribution of Allusions to the Meaning of the Novel

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *The Jungle*: Formalist Activity One: Allusions.

NOTE: Each student will probably need more than one copy for his own work plus for the reports of his/her classmates.

2. Assign each student (or allow each to choose) one or two chapters from the book to examine for allusions and complete the chart.
3. Reconvene the class and have students report their findings, completing their charts to reflect all of the identified allusions.
4. As a class, discuss the following:
 - Do the allusions in this novel tend to be specific or global? (That is, do they help to define or illustrate a single character or idea, or do they contribute to a broader idea?)
 - Do the allusions fit into any particular category (e.g.: mythological, biblical)?
 - Are the allusions generally accessible or obscure? Are they readily recognizable, or do they require research and additional reading? What does this suggest to you about Sinclair's intent?
 - What seems to be the overall purpose of the allusions: to help communicate ideas, establish tone or mood, develop character, etc.?
 - Do the allusions tend to be "clustered" in any particular part(s) of the book or evenly distributed? What does this suggest to you?
 - Overall, do the allusions enhance or detract from the reader's understanding and appreciation of the sections in which they appear? Why?

New Historicist Approach Applied to *The Jungle*

Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as it really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another is often lost to history because it is the powerful who have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture of power and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the absolute truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the South during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of, and change certain elements of, that culture.

Activity One

Placing *The Jungle* in a Historical and Social Context

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: *The Jungle: New Historicist Activity One Timeline* and *Placing the Events of The Jungle into a Historical Context*.
2. Assign students to pairs or small groups.
3. Have each group examine the timeline and the novel.
4. Then have them speculate *when* certain key plot events in the novel probably took place. In the spaces provided, have them state the evidence from the timeline on which they are basing their speculation.

NOTE: Emphasize to students that they have neither time nor room to try to place every discrete plot event on the chart, but if they know from the novel, for instance, that Jurgis's first night in jail is the same night that the Golden Spike was laid, completing the Transcontinental Railroad, then they know that that event took place in 1869.

5. Reconvene the class and allow each pair or small group to report its findings.
6. Discuss any key discrepancies.

NOTE: Students do not need to agree or even come to consensus, unless the discrepancy is the result of a blatant misread of either the novel or the time sheet.

7. Discuss any significant problems (for example, are there instances in which the chronological order of the novel seems to contradict the chronology of events on the time sheet?).
8. As a class, discuss the following questions:
 - How intentional is Sinclair in creating a historical background for his novel?
 - How closely aligned is the novel to actual movements and events during the time period?
 - What kind of view of actual movements and events do we get from the novel?
 - Does Sinclair's purpose seem more to report or persuade? Why do you think that?
 - How effective is he in achieving his purpose? Why?
 - What evidence is there in the novel that Sinclair was writing primarily for a contemporaneous audience?
 - What evidence is there in the novel that Sinclair may have been writing for posterity?



Feminist Approach Applied to *The Jungle*

Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.



Activity One

Examining Sinclair's Portrayal of Women

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *The Jungle*: Feminist Activity One: Analyzing and Evaluating Female Characters.
2. Divide the class into six groups or a number of groups divisible by six.
3. Assign each group (or allow each to choose) one of the following female characters:
 - Ona
 - Teta Elzbieta
 - Marija Berczynskas
 - Grandmother Majauszkiene
 - Kotrina
 - Miss Henderson
4. Have groups examine the passages in the novel that include their character and supply the information requested on the handout.
5. Reconvene the class and allow each group to report its findings.
6. Discuss whether there is an overall trend in Sinclair's development and portrayal of female characters and what that trend indicates.