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SAMPLE EXCERPTS FROM THE MONKEYNOTES FOR
"The Jungle"

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The Jungle

by

Upton Sinclair



Edited by Diane Sauder

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

Barring a brief flashback to rural Lithuania, from where the main characters of the novel hail, *The Jungle* is set in Chicago's Packingtown, a busy industrial area that houses the.....

Major Characters

Jurgis Rudkus - Young, strong, and optimistic, he believes that his combination of physical strength and willingness to work endlessly can overcome all odds. His chief aim is to prove himself capable of marrying his love, Ona, and ensure a decent life for her family and his aged and ailing father.

Ona Lukoszaite - Both physically and emotionally delicate, Ona, Jurgis' seventeen-year-old sweetheart and later wife, is thoroughly ill-prepared for the rigors of life in Packingtown. She is a complete contrast to Jurgis in every sense.

Elzbieta Lukoszaite (Teta Elzbieta) - Old, yet blessed with great reserves of strength, Ona's loving stepmother tries hard to build the semblance of a home in a

Minor Characters

Grandmother Majauszkiene - A knowledgeable Lithuanian neighbor and Socialist. She is a prophet of doom for the family.

The Settlement Worker - A rich lady who is moved by the family's plight and secures Jurgis a job in a steel mill.

Madame Haupt - An obese Dutch midwife who.....

CONFLICT

Protagonist: The protagonists of the novel are a young Lithuanian couple, Jurgis Rudkus and Ona Lukoszaite, and their family. Ona is integral to the story, until she dies halfway through the novel. The other family members are also essential to the plot. But the novel revolves mainly around Jurgis, whose evolution from Lithuanian peasant to immigrant

Antagonist: The antagonist of the novel is Packingtown, the stronghold of the meat packaging industry, situated in the stockyard district of

Climax: The climax of the novel comes when Jurgis learns that Ona has been raped by one of her bosses and forced into prostitution. In a murderous mood, Jurgis attacks the.....

Outcome: Although essentially a tragic story, the novel ends on a very hopeful note, with the hero Jurgis finding a renewed commitment to life, the remnants

PLOT (Synopsis)

A young immigrant Lithuanian couple, Jurgis Rudkus and Ona Lukoszaite, are celebrating their marriage in traditional peasant style in the backroom of a saloon in Chicago's Packingtown. The couple is part of a large family that has come to America in hopes of a better life. The marriage scene is actually a flash forward of events. The next chapter in the novel takes the reader back to Lithuania, where

Elzbieta's brother Jonas suggests moving to America.

After an arduous journey, the family arrives in Packingtown, where Jokubas Szedvilas, a fellow Lithuanian immigrant, introduces them to the filthy, stinking part of the city which will be their home. Young, strong and fresh, Jurgis gets a job, and Jonas and Marija also soon find employment. But old Dede Antanas, Jurgis' father, is rejected everywhere. The family has rented living quarters in the filthy boarding house run by Aniele Jukniene, but Jurgis and the others want to buy a house. An attractive advertisement for a house brings them to a dishonest house agent. They do buy a house, but are made to sign a treacherous deed, whose contents they do not comprehend. As the house agent makes more.....

THEMES

Major Theme

The theme of the book is aptly described by its title, *The Jungle*. Packingtown is a jungle, where the packers drive humans to live like animals. The workers face.....

Minor Theme

A minor but important theme of the book is the promise of

MOOD

The mood for the most part is tragic and grim, as the main characters face.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

UPTON SINCLAIR

Upton Beall Sinclair Jr. was born on September 20, 1878, in Baltimore. His father, an unsuccessful salesman, was habituated to drink and his mother came from a wealthy family. At the age of ten, Sinclair moved with his family to New York City, where his formal education began. At fourteen, he entered the City College of New York and began supporting himself by writing pulp fiction. After graduating in 1897, he went on to do graduate work at Columbia University.

In 1900, Sinclair moved from New York to New Jersey and married Meta Fuller the same year. A year later, he privately published his first novel, *Springtime and Harvest* (later renamed *King Midas*) His first child, David, was also born that same year. Sinclair's marriage broke up by 1911. He was unable to get a divorce in America, however, and moved to Holland for a.....

Literary / Historical Information

Several English novels have documented real-life class and racial exploitation in dramatic form. These include Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (1850), which dealt with the chartist movement, an attempt by British workers to obtain political and economic reforms, Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil or The Two Nations* (1845), which detailed the wretched lives of the masses in

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

CHAPTER 1

The novel opens with the wedding celebration of Ona Lukoszaite and Jurgis Rudkus, Lithuanian immigrants who have recently arrived in Packingtown. The *veselija*, the wedding feast, is being held strictly according to Lithuanian custom. Ona's cousin Marija Berczynskas is in charge of the event, which is being held in the rear room of a saloon. A cello and two fiddles make up the band. The bride is extremely young, slight and nervous. The groom, in contrast, possesses "mighty shoulders and giant hands." Two tables groaning under the weight of a huge feast prepared by Ona's family take up a third of the room. An oily and dishonest bartender presides over the bar. The overwhelming feeling is one of excitement, noise and confusion.

Tamoszius Kuszleika, the lead violinist, plays with the fury of a man possessed. He is a semi-comic character who carries the burden of providing music for the feast from four in the afternoon to four the next morning. Many traditional songs are played. Then the bridegroom's father, Dede Antanas, makes a sentimental speech that leaves the audience in tears. When the meal is finished, the dancing begins in earnest. The older couples dance in the traditional Lithuanian style and are also dressed traditionally. The young, in contrast, dance and dress according to the latest fashions.

The dancing is followed by the great event of the evening, the *acziavimas*. The guests hold hands to form a ring around the bride. One by one, the men enter the circle and dance with the bride and then drop some money into a hat held by Teta Elzbieta. This collection goes towards paying for the feast and setting up the young couple's home. The *acziavimas* turns out to be a disaster, however, for many of the young people slip away without paying their share. Although many among the older guests are more than generous with their share, the amount collected is nowhere near expectations and might not even cover the expense of the party. An enraged Marija picks a fight with one of the freeloaders. A policeman intervenes and breaks up the fisticuffs. Jurgis reassures a frantic Ona that he will work harder and make up the losses. When the entire company is in a liquor-induced stupor, Jurgis lifts a faint Ona into his arms and walks home, painfully aware that they have to reach their respective workplaces the next morning. Before going to bed, he reassures her once again that he will work harder and take care of them.

Notes

The wedding scene with which the novel opens is a flash forward to the future. When the next chapter opens, Jurgis and Ona are still to be married. The entire proceedings are characterized by two emotions, a fairytale like unreality and a sense of foreboding. On the one hand, it is the only time in the lives of the characters that there is a predominance of gaiety. Yet, within the fabric of celebration are woven the threads of tragedy and reality. For instance, the music gives the celebration room the feel of a wonderland, "a little corner of the high mansions of the sky." In reality however, the place is just the dingy rear room of a saloon in the back of the yards. The music too is not quite tuneful, yet the revelers ignore it, just as they do the dirt, noise and squalor with which they are surrounded. The author employs farce to illustrate the farcical nature of his characters' existence, their acceptance of sufferings as the building blocks of their lives.

While the celebration is a traditional one, it is marked by a struggle between the old and the new. The modern generation does not want to dress or dance in the traditional manner, nor do the youngsters keep

up the old custom of *acziavimas*, the contribution for the wedding feast. The stinginess of the young, many of whom drink for free at the bar without even acknowledging the bride and groom, is in contrast to the heroic generosity of the older generation, many of whom can barely afford their gift. The fact that these immigrant Lithuanian peasants are finding it hard to keep up old traditions even at important occasion like weddings, hints at their present tragic situation that is portrayed as the book unfolds.

This quick contrasts of joy and sorrow, laughter and anguish, is characteristic of this chapter. Jurgis and Ona are happy, yet emotionally overwrought. Dede Antanas, Jurgis' father, convinced that he has not long to live and coughing continually gives a moving speech that brings tears to everyone's eyes. Outwardly busy with the cooking, laughter and dancing, inwardly Teta Elzbieta is making fearful mental estimates of the cost of the celebration. Marija, upset at the behavior of some of the freeloaders, nearly starts a fight. Everyone is aware that after the night's revelry, they will have to return to work the next day and they are determined to live this rare night of pleasure to the fullest.

The wedding feast is not merely an event in the lives of Jurgis and Ona, but a symbol of the bitter and at times impractical struggle of a people who are losing their souls bit by bit to maintain something human in the face of dehumanization. The staggering expenditure of a year's income by impoverished people on a wedding feast may be imprudent, even tragic, but it is beautiful. Says Sinclair of his revelers' motivations. "One might dwell within the cave and gaze upon shadows, provided only that once in his lifetime he could break his chains, and feel his wings, and behold the sun." This image, alas, carries with it a foreboding hint at the future, the indication that it is only these few golden memories that the immigrants will have to survive on for the rest of their lives.

Just as Ona is the epitome of delicacy and fragility, Jurgis epitomizes the strength and optimism of youth. He possesses an indomitable spirit, yet it is already evident that life in Packingtown will break this spirit. When faced with the fact that the collection from the *acziavimas* is less than expected, Jurgis simply replies he will work harder. Nevertheless, the reader begins to suspect that Jurgis will not succeed.

By the end of the wedding feast Ona almost faints with exhaustion. Her employers have refused her a day of leave after the wedding. As the couple returns home, Jurgis insists that Ona should not go to Brown's, her workplace, for daybreak is just a few hours away. Whether or not Ona does go to work remains unknown for now. This unanswered question is a tool used by the author to create a sense of anticipation about future events.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

Characters

Jurgis Rudkus

The hero of the book, Jurgis Rudkus, is not a static character. With almost every chapter, the reader finds him evolving into a different kind of person. In the initial stages of the novel, the two most striking features of Jurgis' personality are his physical presence and his simple, peasant mindset. In the novel's opening scene

Ona Lukoszaite

At the wedding feast where she is first introduced to the reader, Ona appears a complete mismatch for

Jurgis. Small, fragile and "one of God's gentlest creatures," she is a complete contrast to Jurgis. Extremely young and delicately built, Ona is initially among those of the family who are not supposed to go out to work in Packingtown. In this respect, she is therefore

Marija Berczynskas

Marija Berczynskas is arguably the strongest female character in the book. She is an orphan who toils under the whip of a tyrannical farmer. Once she is grown, however,

Teta Elzbieta

Stoic, tenacious, and perpetually adaptable, Ona's stepmother, Teta Elzbieta, is a hard-working peasant woman who has learned to accept life's sorrows impassively.....

PLOT (STRUCTURE)

The Jungle is structurally simple and straightforward, except for the opening chapter of the novel, which serves as a flash forward to later events. The wedding scene, which opens the novel, introduces the main characters and places them in the geographic.....

THEMES

Major Theme

The essential theme of the novel is conveyed succinctly by its title -- *The Jungle*. The stockyards of Chicago are a jungle. The packers and politicians are the.....

Minor Theme

The minor theme in the novel is the political one. It is an attempt to.....

STYLE

Attention to language and style is certainly not a.....

Questions

1. How does the relationship between Jurgis and Ona evolve and why?
2. Does Dede Antanas leave a lasting impression in the novel? Justify your answer.

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