

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## The Jungle

by

### Upton Sinclair

### Book Information

Upton Sinclair, The Jungle  
Quiz Number: 5988  
Signet, 1906  
ISBN 0-451-52420-9; LCCN  
352 Pages  
Book Level: 8.0  
Interest Level: UG

Poverty, disease, and despair are depicted in this story of the barbarous working conditions in the slaughter houses of Chicago in 1900.

**Topics:** Community Life, Politics; Community Life, Poverty; Places, Cities; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

### Main Characters

Connor Ona's boss and one of Scully's men, who forces his affections on Ona

Dede Antanas Rudkus Jurgis's father

Jack Duane a young man Jurgis meets in jail who introduces him to a criminal lifestyle

Jurgis Rudkus a Lithuanian immigrant to America who becomes disillusioned by the unfairness, squalor, and wastefulness in the packing industry

Little Antanas Jurgis's and Ona's son, whose death as a three year old causes Jurgis to leave Chicago

Marija Berczynskas Ona's cousin, who tries to help support the family

Mike Scully a corrupt Democratic district boss who controls much of the packing industry

Ona Lukoszaite a frail young Lithuanian girl who marries Jurgis

Stanislovas, Kotrina, Vilimas, Nikalojus Elzbieta's other children, who work to help the family survive

Tamoszius Kuszleika a violin player who courts Marija

Teta Elzbieta Ona's stepmother

Tommy Hinds Jurgis's employer and state organizer for the Socialist party

### Vocabulary

**besom** a broom, especially one consisting of twigs tied to a handle

**bullocks** oxen or steers

**ingot** a mass of metal cast into a bar or other convenient shape

**mendicant** a beggar

**ptomaine** any one of several chemical compounds produced by bacteria in decaying matter

**recalcitrant** one who refuses to obey

**vermin** small animals that are troublesome or destructive, such as fleas, lice, or rats

**viands** food; victuals; especially choice dishes

### Synopsis

The opening scene of the book is the celebration of the wedding of Jurgis Rudkus to Ona. All seems happy and is going well until the traditional *acziavimas*. Customarily, enough money is raised by this dance to cover the costs of the wedding. But this time that is not true.

The author then takes the reader back to Lithuania where Jurgis first asked for Ona in marriage. Even though Ona's father refuses Jurgis, she becomes attainable when the father dies. Having nothing to keep them in Lithuania, Ona, Jurgis, Ona's stepmother and her children, Ona's cousin, and Jurgis's father decide to find their fortunes in America.

On their journey they are swindled out of some of the precious savings they need to start out in America. Eventually, they arrive in Chicago, where they are sent to Packingtown to look for employment and housing. Jurgis readily finds employment, and the family purchases a house. Keeping up with the hidden costs involved in the house becomes the focus for the family. Time and again when it seems like they have the payments covered, the family suffers a tragedy. The house is lost to the family when Jurgis serves a month in jail for attacking Ona's boss. Jurgis returns from prison to find the family starving. Ona and their second child die in childbirth shortly after.

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Jurgis determines to make a good life for his surviving son. Looking for a job, Jurgis finds he has been blacklisted in Packingtown. When he finds a job in another part of the city, he is again disappointed when the department of the factory at which he finds work closes down without warning.

Jurgis leaves the city disillusioned with working conditions and America after his son dies. He lives as a tramp in the country until winter weather forces him to return to the city. Here he joins forces with Jack Duane and takes part in muggings, pay scams, political campaigns, and union strikes. When he is once again homeless and out of work, he happens to hear a Socialist speaker. He agrees with the Socialist principles, and he becomes a promoter of Socialism.

### Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

#### Initial Understanding

What does Jurgis do that shows he feels a strong responsibility for his family?

*He keeps trying to find jobs to support the family even when he is injured. After he returns from the country, he does not want to go home until he has a job so he will not be a burden to them.*

#### Literary Analysis

Why do you think the policeman at the station directs the family to the stockyards when they arrive in Chicago?

*He knows that as immigrants they need work and can not speak English. The stockyards offer numerous jobs which do not require a knowledge of the language. The greater share of the jobs at the stockyards were held by immigrants. It is likely that long-time residents seldom sought work in the stockyards.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

When the family first comes to Chicago, Jurgis says that neither Ona nor Teta Elzbieta will work outside the house. Why do you think he says this?

*There are several factors which could bring him to this decision. He probably feels he can earn enough money to support the rest of the family and there are still children at home who need care. Most likely, the Lithuanian culture portrays the man of the family as the one who provides for the rest of the family.*

#### Constructing Meaning

Predict how Jurgis will be involved with Socialism.

*Judging from what he does when he joins the union, it seems likely that he will find out all he can about Socialism by listening to speakers and reading. He will probably continue to try to sway people by telling his story at the hotel.*

### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** In the reading of the book, we learn that there have been waves of immigrants to the area. First the Germans came, followed by the Irish and Lithuanians who were being displaced from their jobs by the Czechs and Yugoslavians. Have students research immigration to the Chicago area during the early nineteenth hundreds and make a timeline showing the years of largest immigration by the different nationalities. Also indicate events in the homelands contributing to the large numbers immigrating at that time.

**Comparing and Contrasting** When the family has no one else to put to work to earn money to keep the house, the children are taken out of school to work. Stanislovas is the first to go to work placing lard cans on a machine in the factory. Later, Vilimas, Nikalojus, and Kotrina go downtown to sell newspapers. Have students research the child labor laws and the school truancy laws that existed in the early nineteenth hundreds. Have them compare these to laws which relate to children today.

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**Making Predictions** At the end of the story, Mr. Lucas and Mr. Schliemann speak to a group which includes an editor from a big Eastern magazine. Prior to coming to Chicago, the editor has written against Socialism. Have the students write an article which would have been written by that editor after having heard Mr. Lucas and Mr. Schliemann speak on Socialism.

**Responding to Literature** When Jurgis becomes a tramp in the country, he regains much of his health. The exercise, fresh air, and good food help him. Have the students consider how the story might have been changed if the family had gone first to a country area. How would their lives have been changed? What different challenges would they have faced? What would have been the benefits and the drawbacks for them?