

Literature Selection

from *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair

When Upton Sinclair (1878-1968) wrote *The Jungle*, his descriptions of the meat-packing industry caught the public's attention. The book helped lead to the passage of the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act. *The Jungle* tells the story of a Lithuanian immigrant, Jurgis Rudkus, and his family. They live in Chicago. This passage is about Jurgis's mother-in-law, Elzbieta. To help the family, she takes a job in a sausage factory.

Elzbieta was used to working, but she found this change a hard one, for the reason that she had to stand motionless upon her feet from seven o'clock in the morning till half-past twelve, and again from one till half-past five. For the first few days it seemed to her that she could not stand it—she suffered almost as much as Jurgis had from the fertilizer, and would come out at sundown with her head fairly reeling.

Besides this, she was working in one of the dark holes, by electric light, and the dampness, too, was deadly—there were always puddles of water on the floor, and a sickening odor of moist flesh in the room. The people who worked here followed the ancient custom of nature, whereby the ptarmigan¹ is the color of dead leaves in the fall and of snow in the winter, and the chameleon,² who is black when he lies upon a stump and turns green when he moves to a leaf. The men and women who worked in this department were precisely the color of the “fresh country sausage” they made.

The sausage room was an interesting place to visit, for two or three minutes, and provided that you did not look at the people; the machines were perhaps the most wonderful things in the entire plant. Presumably sausages were once chopped and stuffed by hand, and if so it would be interesting to know how many workers had been displaced by these inventions.

On one side of the room were the hoppers,³ into which men shoveled loads of meat and wheelbarrows full of spices; in these great bowls were whirling knives that made two thousand revolutions a minute, and when the meat was ground fine and adulterated⁴ with potato flour, and well mixed with water, it was forced to the stuffing machines on the other side of the room. The latter were tended by women; there was a sort of spout, like the nozzle of a hose, and one of the women would take a long string of “casing” and put the end over the nozzle and then work the whole thing on, as one works on the finger of a tight glove. This string would be twenty or thirty feet long, but the woman would have it all on in a jiffy; and when she had several on, she would press a lever, and a stream of sausage meat would be shot out, taking the casing with it as it came. Thus one might stand and see appear, miraculously born from the machine, a wriggling snake of sausage of incredible length.

In front was a big pan which caught these creatures, and two more women who seized them as fast as they appeared and twisted them into links. This was for the uninitiated the most perplexing work of all; for all that the woman had to give was a single turn of the wrist; and in some way she contrived to give it so that instead of an endless chain of sausages, one after another, there grew under her hands a bunch of strings, all dangling from

1. **ptarmigan** (TAHR•mih•guhnh): Arctic bird that changes color with the seasons.

2. **chameleon** (kuh•MEEL•ee•uhn): a lizard that changes color to match its surroundings.

3. **hoppers**: tanks or containers, often funnel-shaped, from which the contents can be emptied into other containers.

4. **adulterated** (uh•DUHL•tur•ayt•ihd): made impure by adding substances.

a single center. It was quite like the feat of a prestidigitator⁵—for the woman worked so fast that the eye could literally not follow her, and there was only a mist of motion, and tangle after tangle of sausages appearing. In the midst of the mist, however, the visitor would suddenly notice the tense set face, with the two wrinkles graven in the forehead, and the ghastly pallor of the cheeks; and then he would suddenly recollect that it was time he was going on. The woman did not go on; she stayed right there—hour after hour, day after day, year after year, twisting sausage links and racing with death. It was piecework, and she was apt to have a family to keep alive; and stern and ruthless economic laws had arranged it that she could only do this by working just as she did, with all her soul upon her work, and with never an instant for a glance at the well-dressed ladies and gentlemen who came to stare at her, as at some wild beast in a menagerie.⁶

With one member trimming beef in a cannery, and another working in a sausage factory, the family had a first-hand knowledge of the great majority of Packingtown⁷ swindles. For it was the custom, as they found, whenever meat was so spoiled that it could not be used for anything else, either to can it or else to chop it up into sausage. With what had been told them by Jonas,⁸ who had worked in the pickle rooms, they could now study the whole of the spoiled-meat industry on the inside, and read a new and grim meaning into that old Packingtown jest—that they use everything of the pig except the squeal.

Jonas had told them how the meat that was taken out of pickle⁹ would often be found sour, and how they would rub it up with soda to take away the smell, and sell it to be eaten on free-lunch counters; also of all the miracles of chemistry which they performed, giving to any sort of meat, fresh or salted, whole or chopped, any color and any flavor and any odor they chose. In the pickling of hams they had an ingenious apparatus, by which they saved time and increased the capacity of the plant—a machine consisting of a hollow needle attached to a pump; by plunging this needle into the meat and working with his foot, a man could fill a ham with pickle in a few seconds. And yet, in spite of this, there would be hams found spoiled, some of them with an odor so bad that a man could hardly bear to be in the room with them. To pump into these the packers had a second and much stronger pickle which destroyed the odor—a process known to the workers as “giving them thirty per cent.”

Also, after the hams had been smoked, there would be found some that had gone to the bad. Formerly these had been sold as “Number Three Grade,” but later on some ingenious person had hit upon a new device, and now they would extract the bone, about which the bad part generally lay, and insert in the hole a white-hot iron. After this invention there was no longer Number One, Two, and Three Grade—there was only Number One Grade. The packers were always originating such schemes—they had what they called “boneless hams,” which were all the odds and ends of pork stuffed into casings; and “California hams,” which were the shoulders, with big knuckle joints, and nearly all the meat cut out; and fancy “skinned hams,” which were made of the oldest hogs, whose skins were so heavy and coarse that no one would buy them—that is, until they had been cooked and chopped fine and labeled “head cheese!”

5. prestidigitator (prehs•tuh•Dih•uh•tay•ur): a magician or other performer who confuses onlookers with rapid, tricky hand movements.
6. menagerie (muh•NAJ•uree): an exhibition of wild or strange animals; a small zoo.

7. Packingtown: the Chicago stockyards.
8. Jonas: another member of the family.
9. out of pickle: out of the salty water used to pickle the meat.

It was only when the whole ham was spoiled that it came into the department of Elzbieta. Cut up by the two-thousand-revolutions-a-minute flyers, and mixed with half a ton of other meat, no odor that ever was in a ham could make any difference. There was never the least attention paid to what was cut up for sausage; there would come all the way back from Europe old sausage that had been rejected, and that was moldy and white—it would be dosed with borax¹⁰ and glycerine,¹¹ and dumped into the hoppers, and made over again for home consumption.¹² There would be meat that had tumbled out on the floor, in the dirt and sawdust, where the workers had tramped and spit uncounted billions of consumption germs.¹³ There would be meat stored in great piles in rooms; and the water from leaky roofs would drip over it, and thousands of rats would race about on it. It was too dark in these storage places to see well, but a man could run his hand over these piles of meat and sweep off handfuls of the dried dung of rats. These rats were nuisances, and the packers would put poisoned bread out for them; they would die, and then rats, bread, and meat would go into the hoppers together. This is no fairy story and no joke; the meat would be shoveled into carts, and the man who did the shoveling would not trouble to lift out a rat even when he saw one—there were things that went into the sausage in comparison with which a poisoned rat was a tidbit.

There was no place for the men to wash their hands before they ate their dinner, and so they made a practice of washing them in the water that was to be ladled into the sausage. There were the butt-ends of smoked meat, and the scraps of corned beef, and all the odds and ends of the waste of the plants, that would be dumped into old barrels in the cellar and left there. Under the system of rigid economy which the packers enforced, there were some jobs that it only paid to do once in a long time, and among these was the cleaning out of the waste barrels. Every spring they did it; and in the barrels would be dirt and rust and old nails and stale water—and cartload after cartload of it would be taken up and dumped into the hoppers with fresh meat, and sent out to the public's breakfast. Some of it they would make into "smoked" sausage—but as the smoking took time, and was therefore expensive, they would call upon their chemistry department, and preserve it with borax and color it with gelatine to make it brown. All of their sausage came out of the same bowl, but when they came to wrap it they would stamp some of it "special," and for this they would charge two cents more a pound.

Such were the new surroundings in which Elzbieta was placed, and such was the work she was compelled to do. It was stupefying, brutalizing work; it left her no time to think, no strength for anything. She was part of the machine she tended. . . .

10. **borax** (BAWR•aks): a white crystal salt used in soaps and antiseptics.

11. **glycerine** (GLIHS•ur•ihn): a syrupy liquid made from fats and oils and used as a food preservative; usually spelled glycerin.

12. **home consumption** (kuhn•SUHMP•shuhn): home use.

13. **consumption germs**: Here, consumption refers to tuberculosis, an often fatal disease that afflicted many early 20th-century immigrants.

Main Ideas

1. What is difficult about Elzbieta's job?
2. What did Jonas tell the others about the things that happen in the pickle rooms?

Critical Thinking

3. **Drawing Conclusions** What impression does this passage convey of the meat-packing industry in the early years of the 20th century?
4. **Evaluating** Why do you think this novel helped bring about the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act?