A Shot to the Stomach: The Literary Failure and Journalistic Success of Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle

Abstract

Written with the express purpose of impacting the reform of Chicago’s early twentieth-century meatpacking industry, Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle is most typically associated with the genre of journalism known as muckraking; however, Sinclair chose to publish a work of fiction, one that stylistically fits within the tradition of American Naturalism. In understanding the novel’s contemporary historical significance in conjunction with its stylistic elements, close reading of the text ultimately reveals it to be a novel that failed as a work of fiction, but that succeeded in an unintended manner as a work of journalism. Quite explicitly, Upton Sinclair wrote The Jungle intending to incite the American public to sympathize with the plight of industrial workers. In an article featured in Cosmopolitan Magazine in October of 1906—a mere eight months after Doubleday’s first printing of The Jungle—Sinclair expressed his belief that its publication marked the advent of “proletarian literature in America.” Further expanding upon his novel’s purpose, Sinclair wrote, “I wished to frighten the country by a picture of what its industrial masters were doing to their victims.” With the stated intention of frightening the country, Sinclair’s depiction of the Chicago stockyards was deliberately controversial; however, despite the fact that the novel became, in the very year that it was published, a sensation, Sinclair’s intention to change the exploitative employment practices of the “industrial masters” was not ultimately realized. Indeed, the novel’s greatest impact—namely that it was widely perceived as being responsible for the Federal Meat Inspection Act of 1906—was the result of the novel’s failure as a work of fiction.