ACROSS THE CONTINENT

During the years following the Civil War, the United States enjoyed intense growth. New industries sprang up and prospered. Immigrants poured into the eastern cities, swelling urban populations. Steel mills and meat-packing plants seemed to promise opportunities and possibilities to the newcomers. In addition, the western lands began to attract ranchers and farmers. People everywhere were certain that, if they were willing to work hard enough, America would fulfil their dreams of success and prosperity.

Just under the surface of this growth and prosperity, however, the United States faced serious problems. The cities were growing too fast to maintain decent housing and services for the newcomers. There were few laws to regulate unsafe and unhealthy working conditions in the factories. Political corruption was widespread. Many people began to see their dreams turn to nightmares.

In the newly opening areas in the West, settlers often faced conflicts with native Americans over land ownership. In addition, establishing farms in the new area meant constant struggle and exhausting work.

Writers of the period addressed these problems, both in the cities and on the plains. Through the eyes of recent immigrants, Upton Sinclair's novel, *The Jungle*, examines urban areas and big business in America at the turn of the century. Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* explores immigrant life on the Nebraska frontier.

From *THE JUNGLE* Upton Sinclair

Upton Sinclair had intended *The Jungle* to expose the unfair and dangerous conditions for the workers in Chicago's meat-packing plants. Instead, the public was horrified by his descriptions of filthy surroundings and tainted meat. Soon after the publication of *The Jungle*, the federal government passed both the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act.

As you read the following passages from The Jungle, ***try to identify typical problems faced by new immigrants. What evidence do you see of the oppression of the city? How does Sinclair reveal the corruption of big business and the abuse of the workers by labor practices?***

So in the summer time they had all set out for America. . . .

There were twelve in all in the party, five adults and six children—and Ona, who was a little of both. They had a hard time on the passage; there was an agent who helped them, but he proved a scoundrel, and got them into a trap with some officials, and cost them a good deal of their precious money, which they clung to with such horrible fear. This happened to them again in New York—for, of course, they knew nothing about the country, and had no one to tell them, and it was easy for a man in a blue uniform to lead them away, and to take them to a hotel and keep them there, and make them pay enormous charges to get away. The law says that the rate card shall be on the door of a hotel, but it does not say that it shall be in Lithuanian.

It was in the stockyards that Jona's friend had gotten rich, and so to Chicago the party was bound. . . . Then, tumbled out of the cars without ceremony,

they were no better off than before; they stood staring down the vista of Dearborn Street, with its big black buildings towering in the distance, unable to realize that they had arrived, and why, when they said "Chicago," people no longer pointed in some direction, but instead looked perplexed, or laughed, or went on without paying any attention. . . . In the morning an interpreter was found, and they were taken and put upon a car and taught a new word—"stockyards." Their delight at discovering that they were to get out of this adventure without losing another share of their possessions, it would not be possible to describe.

They sat and stared out of the window. They were on a street which seemed to run on forever, mile after mile—thirty-four of them, if they had known it—and each side of it one uninterrupted row of wretched little two-story frame buildings. Down every side street they could see, it was the same—never a hill and never a hollow, but always the same endless vista of ugly and dirty little wooden buildings. Here and there would be a bridge crossing a filthy creek, with hard-baked mud shores and dingy sheds and docks along it; here and there would be a railroad crossing, with a tangle of switches, and locomotives puffing, and rattling freight cars filing by; here and there would be a great factory, a dingy building with innumerable windows in it, and immense volumes of smoke pouring from the chimneys, darkening the air above and making filthy the earth beneath. But after each of these interruptions, the desolate procession would begin again—the procession of dreary little buildings. . . .

And along with the thickening smoke they began to notice another circumstance, a strange, pungent odor. They were not sure that it was unpleasant, this odor; some might have called it sickening, but their taste in odors was not developed, and they were only sure that it was curious. Now, sitting in the trolley car, they realized that they were on their way to the home of it—that they had travelled all the way from Lithuania to it. It was now no longer something far off and faint, that you caught in whiffs; you could literally taste it, as well as smell it—you could take hold of it, almost, and examine it at your leisure. . . . The new emigrants were still tasting it, lost in wonder, when suddenly the car came to a halt, and the door was flung open, and a voice shouted—"Stockyards!" . . .

"Tomorrow," Jurgis said, when they were left alone, "tomorrow I will get a job, and perhaps Jonas will get one also; and then we can get a place of our own."

Later that afternoon he and Ona went out to take a walk and look about them, to see more of this district which was to be their home . . . One wondered about this, as also about the swarms of flies which hung about the scene, literally blackening the air, and the strange, fetid odor which assailed one's nostrils, a ghastly odor, of all the dead things of the universe. . . . Was it not unhealthful? the stranger would ask, and the residents would answer, "Perhaps, but there is no telling. . . ."

Beyond this dump there stood a great brickyard, with smoking chimneys. First they took out the soil to make bricks, and then they filled it up again with garbage, which seemed to Jurgis and Ona a felicitous arrangement, characteristic of an enterprising country like America. A little way beyond was another great hole, which they had emptied and not yet filled up. This held water, and all summer it stood there, with the nearby soil draining into it, festering and stewing in the sun; and then, when winter came, somebody cut the ice on it, and sold it to the people of the city. This, too, seemed to the newcomers an economical arrangement; for they did not read the newspapers, and their heads were not full of troublesome thoughts about "germs". . . .

It was a study in colors now, this smoke; in the sunset light it was black and brown and gray and purple. All the sordid suggestions of the place were gone—in the twilight it was a vision of power. To the two who stood watching while the darkness swallowed it up, it seemed a dream of wonder, with its tale of human energy, of things being done, of employment for thousands upon thousands of men, of opportunity and freedom, of life and love and joy. . . .

It seemed as if every time you met a person from a new department, you heard of new swindles and new crimes. There was, for instance, a Lithuanian

who was a cattle-butcher for the plant . . . which killed meat for canning only. . . . It seemed that they must have agencies all over the country, to hunt out old and crippled and diseased cattle to be canned. . . .

Jurgis learned a few things about the great and only Durham canned goods, which had become a national institution. They were regular alchemists at Durham's; they advertised a mushroom-catsup, and the men who made it did not know what a mushroom looked like. They advertised "potted chicken"—and it was like the boarding-house soup of the comic papers, through which a chicken had walked with rubbers on. Perhaps they had a secret process for making chickens chemically—who knows? . . .

There was another interesting set of statistics that a person might have gathered in Packingtown—those of the various afflictions of the workers. . . .

There were the men in the pickle rooms, for instance, where old Antanas had gotten his death; scarce a one of these that had not some spot of horror on his person. Let a man so much as scrape his finger pushing a truck in the pickle rooms, and he might have a sore that would put him out of the world; all the joints in his fingers might be eaten by the acid, one by one. Of the butchers and floorsmen, the beef boners and trimmers, and all those who used knives, you could scarcely find a person who had the use of his thumb. . . . There were men who worked in the cooking rooms, in the midst of steam and sickening odors, by artificial light; in these rooms the germs of tuberculosis might live for two years, but the supply was renewed every hour. . . . There were those who worked in the chilling rooms, and whose special disease was rheumatism. . . . There were the "hoisters," as they were called, whose task it was to press the lever which lifted the dead cattle off the floor. They ran along upon a rafter, peering down through the damp and the steam, and as old Durham's architects had not built the killing room for the convenience of the hoisters, at every few feet they would have to stoop under a beam, say four feet above the one they ran on, which got them into the habit of stooping, so that in a few years they would be walking like chimpanzees. Worst of any, however, were the fertilizer men, and those who served in the cooking rooms. These people could not be shown to the visitor—for the odor of a fertilizer man would scare any ordinary visitor at a hundred yards, and as for the other men, who worked in tank rooms full of steam, and in some of which there were open vats near the level of the floor, their peculiar trouble was that they fell into the vats; and when they were fished out, there was never enough of them left to be worth exhibiting—sometimes they would be overlooked for days, till all but the bones of them had gone out to the world as Durham's Pure Leaf Lard! . . .

"The law says that the rate card shall be on the door of a hotel, but it does not say that it shall be in Lithuanian."

[Elzbieta] settled down as a servant of a "sausage machine." . . . 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 now 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 ptarmigan is the color of dead leaves in the fall and of snow in the winter, and the chameleon, 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. . . .

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 Packingtown 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, 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. . . .

MAKING LITERATURE CONNECTIONS

1. What problems did the new immigrants face?
2. How were workers mistreated in the packing plant?
3. What corrupt practices did the meat-packing industry follow?
4. Why was the public more concerned with the descriptions of filthy surroundings and tainted meat than with the unfair and dangerous working conditions?