

The Jungle – *Social Messages in Literature*

Lesson Plan

Grade Level: 9-12

Curriculum Focus: Literature

Lesson Duration: One class period

Student Objectives

- Make a list of books that convey strong social messages.
- Discuss the literary strengths and weaknesses of these books.
- Understand how literature reflects life and can be used as a vehicle to bring about change.

Materials

- Discovery School video on *unitedstreaming: Great Books: The Jungle*
Search for this video by using the video title (or a portion of it) as the keyword.

Selected clips that support this lesson plan:

- The Impact of Upton Sinclair's Expose of the Chicago Meat Industry
 - The History of the Food Safety in the United States
 - Tragedy in the Lives of Ona Lukoszaite and Jurgis Rudkus
 - The Social Significance of "The Jungle"
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- *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair (one copy for each student)
 - Other books with social-action themes

Procedures

1. Discuss *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair, reviewing the book's main literary elements: setting, plot, characters, and central conflict.
2. Discuss the tradition from which this book came. Explain that in the early 1900s, some authors wrote in a style of investigative journalism known as muckraking. Their goal was to reveal social injustices, especially in American business and industry. Sinclair focused on the unsanitary conditions and corrupt management of the meatpacking industry. Published in 1906, this book succeeded in getting the attention of President Theodore Roosevelt, who appointed a commission of inquiry into the meatpacking industry. Although the commission exonerated the packers, Sinclair's book exerted pressure that resulted in a second commission and the passing of the Beef Inspection Act.

3. Ask students whether they think *The Jungle* is successful as fiction and muckraking journalism, or just as the latter. Discuss why it is difficult for a literary work to be both. For example, it is a challenge to dramatize social issues and make them believable. Often the characters are portrayed as symbols, rather than real people.
4. Tell students that during this lesson they will delve into the issue of social action versus fiction. Have students work in groups of four or five to develop a list of at least five other books with social themes that led to political and societal changes or heightened awareness of problems. These books can come from any author, past or present. Tell students to try to pick one book from each of the following categories:
 - Civil rights
 - Women’s rights
 - Children’s rights
 - International issues
 - The immigrant experience
5. If students have trouble coming up with book titles, suggest the books listed below. They may help students think of similar books they have read. A brief description of each book is included.

Civil Rights

- *Native Son* by Richard Wright. Written in 1940, Wright’s novel is the story of Bigger Thomas, a young African American man living in Chicago who commits a murder. The police pursue him ruthlessly, and he is ultimately sentenced to death. The book reveals the atmosphere of racial prejudice in the United States in the 1930s.
- *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1983, the author tells how black women struggled with racism and sexism in the early 1900s.
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Set in Alabama in the 1950s, the book tells the story from a young girl’s perspective of a black man wrongfully accused of raping a white woman. The incident and the ensuing trial had long-lasting consequences for many people.

Women’s Rights

- *Fear of Flying* by Erica Jong. This book presents one woman’s idea of what it meant to be a liberated woman in the early 1970s.
- *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood. An allegorical science fiction novel that shows how women were treated before feminism took hold.
- *Sister Carrie* by Theodore Dreiser. Set in Chicago in the early 1900s, the novel portrays the life of a young woman living alone and working in a factory. The narrative conveys the protagonist’s vulnerability and powerlessness.

Children’s Rights



- *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens. This early 19th-century novel was written to expose the harsh life in orphanages and on the streets for homeless boys.
- *Homecoming* by Cynthia Voigt. Written in the early 1980s, the book depicts the emotional scars children feel when a parent leaves for no apparent reason.

International Issues

- *Cry, the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton. This book, written in 1948, was one of the first to take a stand against apartheid in South Africa.
- *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. Painting a portrait of his own traditional village culture in Africa, the author tries to inform the world about Ibo traditions and remind his own people of their past.

The Immigrant Experience

- *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan. Told through the eyes of a Chinese-American daughter of an immigrant, the book conveys the difficulties a group of women faced in China and the obstacles they experienced when they came to America.
 - *Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. A dramatization of the poverty, prejudice, and other problems migrant farmers experienced in California during the early 1930s.
 - *Native Speaker* by Chang-Rae Lee. A contemporary look at the alienation that many young Korean Americans face.
6. Give each group about 20 minutes to compile its list. Tell students to include books that all or most members of the group have read. Ask the groups to consider the dilemma of literature versus muckraking by answering the following questions for at least three of the books on their lists.
- Do you think the book succeeds in muckraking? Why or why not? Describe a political or societal change that may have resulted from this book. If no actual change can be documented, discuss whether the book resulted in heightened awareness of a particular issue.
 - Do you think the book succeeds as fiction? Are the characters compelling? Do they have a conflict to resolve? Is it resolved in a dramatic yet plausible way?
 - Do you think the book would have been more successful as nonfiction? Why or why not?
7. Discuss how many of the books succeed in being great stories and in muckraking. What makes those books stand out? Why it is difficult for one book to accomplish both goals?

Assessment

Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate students' work during this lesson.

- **3 points:** Students demonstrated a deep understanding of the characteristics of fiction writing and muckraking; have strong knowledge of similar books on other subjects; participated actively in class discussions.

- **2 points:** Students demonstrated an on-grade grasp of the characteristics of fiction writing and muckraking; have average knowledge of similar books on other subjects; participated somewhat actively in class discussions.
- **1 point:** Students demonstrated a weak understanding of the characteristics of fiction writing and muckraking; have below-average knowledge of similar books on other subjects; participated little or not at all in class discussions.

Vocabulary

muckraking

Definition: A type of journalism, begun in the early 1900s, that seeks to uncover misconduct in business, industry, or government

Context: A good example of muckraking, *The Jungle* exposed corruption in the meatpacking industry.

progressive movement

Definition: A campaign in the late 1800s and early 1900s for economic, political, and social reform in the United States

Context: The economic reforms of the progressive movement included increased government regulation of business and a series of tax reforms.

Upton Sinclair (1878–1968)

Definition: Author of *The Jungle* and other books, plays, and articles, all of which focused on social injustices and aimed at improving working conditions

Context: Upton Sinclair wrote books that brought social injustices to light as well as personal wealth and fame.

Academic Standards

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association have developed national standards to provide guidelines for teaching the English language arts. To view the standards online, go to <http://www.ncte.org/about/over/standards/110846.htm>.

This lesson plan addresses the following standards:

- Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world.
- Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions of human experience.

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)



McREL's Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education addresses 14 content areas. To view the standards and benchmarks, visit link:

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>

This lesson plan addresses the following national standards:

- Language Arts – Reading: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts
 - History – United States History: Understands the struggle for racial and gender equality and for the extension of civil liberties
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Support Materials

Develop custom worksheets, educational puzzles, online quizzes, and more with the free teaching tools offered on the [Discoveryschool.com](http://www.discoveryschool.com) Web site. Create and print support materials, or save them to a Custom Classroom account for future use. To learn more, visit

- <http://school.discovery.com/teachingtools/teachingtools.html>