

The Photographs and Writings of Jacob Riis: *How the Other Half Lives*



Directions: Read the excerpts from Jacob Riis's book *How the Other Half Lives* that follows then use the graphic organizer to answer the questions.

In 1877, Jacob Riis, a police reporter whose work appeared in several New York newspapers, documented the living and working conditions of the poor. Through articles, books, photography, and lantern-slide lectures, Riis served as a mediator between working-class, middle-class, and upper-class citizens. Riis argued for better housing, adequate lighting and sanitation, and the construction of city parks and playgrounds. He portrayed middle-class and upper-class citizens as benefactors and encouraged them to take an active role in defining and shaping their communities. Riis believed that charitable citizens would help the poor when they saw for themselves how "the other half" lived.

In December, 1889, an account of city life, illustrated by photographs, appeared in *Scribner's Magazine*. This created a great deal of interest and the following year, a full-length version, *How the Other Half Lives*, was published. The book was seen by President Theodore Roosevelt and the New York Police Commissioner, who were both moved to take action to correct the problems described in the book. According to historian Robert Bremner:

"The reformers' problem was to rouse the public from its lethargy, make consciences uneasy, and stir genial good will into enthusiasm for social betterment. Their first step was to lay bare the responsibility of the community for needless suffering."

Chapter V The Italian in New York

Recent Congressional inquiries have shown the nature of the "assistance" he receives from greedy steamship agents and "bankers," who persuade him by false promises to mortgage his home, his few belongings, and his wages for months to come for a ticket to the land where plenty of work is to be had at princely wages. The padrone--the "banker," is nothing else--having made his ten per cent. Out of him en route, receives him at the landing and turns him to double account as a wage-earner and a rent-payer. In each of these roles he is made to yield a profit to his unscrupulous countryman, whom he trusts implicitly with the instinct of utter helplessness. The man is so ignorant that, as one of the sharpers who prey upon him put it once, it "would be downright sinful not to take him in." His ignorance and unconquerable suspicion of strangers dig the pit into which he falls. He not only knows no word of English, but he does not know enough to learn. Rarely only can he write his own language. Unlike the German, who begins learning English the day he lands as a matter of duty, or the Polish Jew, who takes it up as soon as he is able as an investment, the Italian learns slowly, if at all. Even his boy, born here, often speaks his native tongue indifferently. He is forced, therefore, to have constant recourse to the middle-man, who makes him pay handsomely at every turn. He hires him out to the railroad contractor, receiving a commission from the employer as well as from the laborer, and repeats the performance monthly, or as often as he can have him dismissed. In the city he contracts for his lodging, subletting to him space in the vilest tenements at extortionate rents, and sets an example that does not lack imitators. The "princely wages" have vanished with his coming, and in their place hardships and a dollar a day, behest with the padrone's merciless mortgage, confront him. Bred to even worse fare, he takes both as a matter of course, and, applying the maxim that it is not what one makes but what he saves that makes him rich, manages to turn the very dirt of the streets into a hoard of gold, with which he either returns to his Southern home, or brings over his family to join in his work and in his fortunes the next season.

<p>Who was Jacob Riis and how did he help to bring to light the problems of urbanization?</p>	<p>According to historian Robert Bremner what was the job of reformers during this time period?</p>	<p>List three ways in which bankers and steamship agents in Italy took advantage of immigrants going to the U.S.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1.2.3.	<p>At the end of this passage how does Riis describe the reaction of the Italian immigrants to the problems they face in NY.</p>
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After seeing the photos of Jacob Riis and learning about the lives of immigrants and the poor in tenements at the turn of the century, use your knowledge of this topic and social studies to create three laws that would help solve the problem of tenements.

1.

2.

3.

Directions: Read the two opinions below and compare and evaluate them in order to decide which one you agree with. Write two or three sentences below explaining why you agree with the argument you chose.

Opinion One: Critics of charities argued that poverty was the result of individual or moral weakness; therefore, the poor could not be helped through charitable donations. Gilded Age reformers like Riis believed that poverty was the result of environmental conditions; thus, reform efforts could help the poor. Speaking at an 1895 lecture Riis stated:

"The reason charity has been discredited is because it has worked with the broken fragments, the drunken and the shiftless, helping as it could, mourning that such things must be, but never asking the reason why or knowing anything of the honest, thrifty poor who live lives of heroism such as we cannot live." Riis believed that moral citizens, regardless of their economic status, should be given a chance to improve their so they could rise out of poverty and into the ranks of the middle class. He believed that the wealthy should help transform the slums into better places to live. "I am a believer in organized, systematic charity upon the evidence of my senses," Riis wrote in his autobiography.

Opinion Two: Social Darwinism gives a moral justification for rejecting social insurance and help for the poor. "In America," says Robert Bork, "the rich' are overwhelmingly people – entrepreneurs, small businessmen, corporate executives, doctors, lawyers, etc. – who have gained their higher incomes through intelligence, imagination, and hard work." Any transfer of wealth from rich to poor thereby undermines the nation's moral fiber. Allow the virtuous rich to keep more of their earnings and pay less in taxes, and they'll be even more virtuous. Give the non-virtuous poor food stamps, Medicaid, and what's left of welfare, and they'll fall into deeper moral torpor.
