



Jacob Riis and his exposé of New York's City's impoverished residents:

An analysis of Riis's ability to shed light where it was most needed: tenement housing.

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At the end of the 19th century, muckrakers and other reformers employed numerous tactics to encourage the public to advocate for necessary social reforms. Jacob Riis shocked the nation with his photographs of New York City's slum tenements and its inhabitants. His accompanying book, *How the Other Half Lives*, provides an in-depth exposé of the dangers that tenement life poses to middle-class values. Because all life is a product of its environment, Riis used photographs and his prose to encourage members of the middle class to acknowledge the poor's plight before it became a parasite that infected and undermined society's ability to function. This research analyzes Riis's photographic and journalistic tactics, the criticism that accompanies these strategies, and the impact his approaches had on tenement reform and people's understanding of life in the tenement houses.

I.) Jacob Riis's Biography.

Jacob Riis exposed the evil of poverty in New York City and its destructive effects on society through his writings and photographs. His exposé altered public opinion on this social issue, encouraged the enactment of political reforms, and impacted the way journalists and muckrakers convey the poor's plight to their communities. Riis's life experiences fostered in him a firm sense of middle-class values and helped him understand the importance that having a supportive environment has on one's understanding of themselves in the world. These beliefs caused Riis to become a champion of tenement housing reform because he wanted to ensure that every environment could foster middle-class values.

Riis immigrated to the United States from Ribe, Demark in 1870 after being unable to advance professions in his homeland. When he arrived New York, half of the city's 1.5 million residents were foreign born and often lived in overcrowded tenements. Until 1877, Riis struggled to pay for the basic necessities: housing and food. He spent numerous nights in New York's police lodging houses and eventually left the city for the Mid-Atlantic and Midwest, where he sold books and flat irons and worked in shipyards and factories.¹ "The many setbacks that he encountered educated him to a realization of the limits of the promises of equality and opportunity."²

In 1887, Riis began working as a crime beat reporter for the New York *Tribune* and the Associated Press Bureau. In this position, Riis developed writing skills, friendships, contacts with philanthropic organizations, and a first-hand knowledge of New York City's immigrant ghettos. Prior to 1877, Riis was so busy trying to earn enough money for his day-to-day survival and to provide for his family that he did not develop a deep social consciousness. However, upon securing

¹ Carol Quirke, "Picturing the Poor: Jacob Riis' Reform Photography," *Reviews in American History* 36 (2008): 557, Online.

² James B. Lane, *Jacob A. Riis and the American City* (Port Washington, New York: National University Publications, 1974), 15-6.

a job with the *Tribune*, Riis began paying more attention to the plight of the poor and developed a sympathetic understanding of their conditions.³ “For Riis, journalism served as a vehicle for securing a higher place in American society, for protesting slum conditions, and for thrusting him into contact with people who shared his concern with the decaying city.”⁴

The origins of Riis’s reform impulses are linked to his contacts at the Board of Health, particularly Roger S. Tracy, a friend who worked as a sanitary inspector and statistician. “Tracy’s role was to reenforce Riis’s humanitarian instincts and arm him with more refined weapons with which to joust with his antagonists.”⁵ Riis accepted this role as a reformer and became one of the most active moral crusaders of the Progressive Era. Tracy admired Riis and thought of Riis as a poet “...who could take a mere item of news and write a story ‘brimming with pathos, humor and sympathetic insight. Riis understood well that his most successful articles were the ones which appealed to the emotions, to fear or guilt or compassion.’”⁶

In 1888, Riis began presenting illustrated lectures about tenement life. He was inspired to do this after taking a tour of the slums with sanitation inspectors. Riis thought a photographic display of the horrific conditions would best attract attention and would encourage the political reforms he sought. On January 25, 1888, Riis made his first speech titled, “The Other Half, How It Lives and Dies in New York,” to a club of amateur photographers. “The New York *Tribune* reported that Riis was so ingenious in his descriptions and ‘brought to his task such a vein of humor that after two hours every one wished that there was more of the exhibition, sad as much of it was.’”⁷ Riis would spice up his lectures with exaggerated vocabulary, allowing him to create a strong interpretive

³ Ibid., 16.

⁴ Ibid., 29.

⁵ Ibid., 35.

⁶ Ibid., 32.

⁷ Ibid., 49.

frameworks for the viewers to understand the photographs.⁸ Spurred by the positive reactions he had to these talks, Riis wrote *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York*, which was published in 1890.

a.) How Jacob Riis Learned Photography.

Riis's job as a reporter helped him recognize the importance and power of photographs. He thought the camera was the "...most effective weapon in his arsenal against unsanitary tenement conditions."⁹ Coincidentally, Riis learned photography by default. He initially hired Dr. John T. Nagle, an amateur photographer who was also the head of the Bureau of Vital Statistics in the Health Department, to help take photographs. When Nagle grew tired of going on photographic exhibitions with Riis, which usually occurred around 2 a.m., Riis hired a professional photographer, who was even less willing to work during the early hours of the morning. "He [the professional photographer] repaid me by trying to sell my photographs behind my back. I had to replevin the negatives to get them away from him."¹⁰ Riis subsequently decided that the only way for him to accomplish his photography goals was to learn the craft himself.

Riis was ecstatic when he learned about a way to take pictures by flashlight: blitzlichtspulver. "One morning, scanning my newspaper at the breakfast table, I put it down with an outcry that startled my wife, sitting opposite. There it was, the thing I had been looking for all those years."¹¹ The powder produced a light so bright that it revealed hidden surfaces that Riis probably did not think even existed until he saw the proof prints. These hidden surfaces provided the shock value

⁸ James Curtis, "Making Sense of Documentary Photography," History Matters, Online.

⁹ Cindy Weinstein, "How Many Others Are There in the Other Half? Jacob Riis and the Tenement Population," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 24, no. 2 (2002): 202, Online.

¹⁰ Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), 175.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 173.

that Riis was looking for in his photographs. “[H]is photographs effectively made everything seem, if possible, dirtier, more crowded, more chaotic than the reality.”¹²

Riis used this invention to let light in where it was most needed: on the darkest and most horrific corners of life in the tenements. On February 12, 1888, *The New York Sun* published 12 drawings that were based on Riis’s early photographs. The article titled “Flashes from the Slums” accompanied these images. In this article, Riis “...described his role as ‘guide and conductor’ for a group of amateur photographers ‘experimenting with the process of taking instantaneous pictures by artificial light.’”¹³ Riis’s career as a photojournalist who sought to expose the evils and dangers of tenement life had begun.¹⁴

b.) *How the Other Half Lives.*

The success of his slide lectures and the power of his photographs encouraged Riis to write *How the Other Half Lives* in 1890. “*How the Other Half Lives* was written at night while the house slept, for I had my office work to attend to in the day. Then it was my habit to light the lamps in all the rooms of the lower story and roam through them with my pipe, for I do most of my writing on my feet.”¹⁵ The goal of Riis’s book was to combat the evils of tenement life because Riis believed the slums bred crime, epidemics, paupers, moral decay, and encouraged a corrupt form of governance. Riis thought that, “‘All life eventually accommodates itself to its environment, and human life is no exception.’”¹⁶ Therefore, Riis despised the slums because of the consequences that the environment had upon the health and morals of its inhabitants. “Riis wanted to wipe out poverty before the

¹² Christopher Carter, “Writing with Light: Jacob Riis’s Ambivalent Exposures,” *College English* 71, no. 2: 124, Online.

¹³ Sylvia L. Yount, “Consuming Drama: Everett Shinn and the Spectacular City,” *American Art* 6, no. 4 (1992): 97, Online.

¹⁴ Robert W. Wagner, “Review: Classic Visual Images,” *A V Communication Review* 19, no. 4 (1971): 473, Online.

¹⁵ Jacob A. Riis, *The Making of an American* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1940), 197.

¹⁶ Lane, 54.

culture of the slum affected younger generations and hardened into permanent patterns for individuals, families, communities, and ultimately, the nation.”¹⁷

Riis used photographs in his book to enhance his reader’s understanding of the links between the tenement’s inhumane living conditions and the cruel consequences of the slums on the well being of the poor. “It is easy enough to convince a man that he ought not to harbor the thief who steals people’s property; but to make him see that he has no right to slowly kill his neighbors, or his tenants, by making a death-trap of his house, seems to be the hardest of all tasks.”¹⁸ Once his readers recognized how their ignorance of life in the tenements was harming a generation of tenement dwellers, Riis thought he could advocate for political reforms. He thought that the combination of words and photographs was the most effective way to achieve this connection from his readers.

Riis also used photography as a way to counter statistics. “The ‘crazy-quilt’ of tenement life, elsewhere characterized as ‘this queer conglomerate mass of heterogeneous elements’ can best be represented, clarified, and ‘cured’ through photographs.”¹⁹ Statistics could not bring about the political reforms Riis desired because statistics degrade people by not providing them with an individual identity. By photographing people, Riis found a solution to the tenement dweller’s dilemmas because he was giving them back their identity. Once this individuality was established, Riis could focus on increasing support for legislative reform. “Photography has the power to elicit sympathy for the other half while eliciting concern on the other half’s behalf—a concern which then takes the self-interested form of tenement legislation, the construction of playgrounds, and sanitation laws.”²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid., 65.

¹⁸ Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, 270.

¹⁹ Weinstein, 201.

²⁰ Ibid., 202.

Riis is acknowledged as the “father of American documentary” because he began the photographic and writing style that was later adopted by Lewis S. Hine, the Farm Security Administration photographers, Dorothy Lange, and other prominent photojournalists.²¹ Author Peter Bacon Hales said, “Riis’s introduction of photography into the domain of the poor was of course a major tactical discovery in the ongoing battle for social justice, but it was at the same time a powerful event in the reconstitution of the slums as an aesthetic or spectacular space.”²² *How the Other Half Lives* was a revolutionary piece of literature because it linked the style of photographs and prose to spur social and political change.

II.) Tenement Information.

Riis provides the definition of a tenement to his readers in *How the Other Half Lives*:

The law defines it as a house “occupied by three or more families, living independently and doing their cooking on the premises; or by more than two families on a door, so living and cooking and having a common right in the halls, stairways, yards, etc.” That is the legal meaning, and includes flats and apartment-houses, with which we have nothing to do. In its narrower sense the typical tenement was thus described when last arraigned before the bar of public justice: “It is generally a brick building from four to six stories high on the street, frequently with a store on the first floor which, when used for the sale of liquor, has a side opening for the benefit of the inmates and to evade the Sunday law; four families occupy each floor, and a set of rooms consists of one or two dark closets, used as bedrooms, with a living room twelve feet by ten. The staircase is too often a dark well in the centre of the house, and no direct through ventilation is possible, each family being separated from the other by partitions. Frequently the rear of the lot is occupied by another building of three stories high with two families on a floor.”²³

When Riis began documenting the tenements at the end of the 19th century, three-quarters of New Yorkers lived in the slum housing.²⁴ He provides the following chart in his book to illustrate the dramatic increase in the number of tenement housing units and their population:²⁵

²¹ Wagner, 474.

²² Keith Gandal, *The Virtues of the Vicious: Jacob Riis, Stephen Crane, and the Spectacle of the Slum* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 65.

²³ Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, 17.

²⁴ Quirke, 561.

²⁵ Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, 304.

New York Tenements, 1869-1890			
	1869	1888	1890
Population	468,492	1,093,701	1,250,000
Under 5 years of age		143,243	163,712
Deaths	13,285	24,842	
Death Rate	28.35	22.71	
Number of tenements in New York December 1, 1888	32, 390		
Number built June 1, 1888, to August 1, 1890	3,733		
Total number of tenements August 1, 1890	37,316		

Death, especially among children, was a rampant problem in the tenements. Riis wrote, “Right here, in this tenement on the east side of the street, they found little Antonia Candia, victim of fiendish cruelty, ‘covered,’ says the account found in the records of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, ‘with sores, and her hair matted with dried blood.’ Abuse is the normal condition of ‘the Bend,’ murder its everyday crop, with the tenants not always the criminals.”²⁶ Riis provided a chart to his readers to highlight his point about the unnecessary deaths that are a result of horrific living conditions of the tenement slums:²⁷

<i>Deaths and Death-rates in 1888 in Baxter and Mulberry Streets, between Park and Baynard Streets.</i>									
	POPULATION.			DEATHS.			DEATH-RATE.		
	Five years old and over	Under five years	Total	Five years old and over	Under five years	Total	Five years old and over	Under five years	General
Baxter Street	1,918	315	2,233	26	46	72	13.56	146.02	32.24
Mulberry Street	2,788	629	3,417	44	86	130	15.78	136.70	38.05
Total	4,706	944	5,650	70	132	202	14.87	139.83	35.75

Riis painted the picture for his readers that the tenements were death traps for their residents. Social reform was necessary to clean up the environment and ensure that all hard-working residents of the tenements be provided with decent housing.

²⁶ Ibid., 302.

²⁷ Ibid., 62.

III.) Analysis of *How the Other Half Lives*.

How the Other Half Lives united Riis's skills as a photographer, reporter, and lecturer. Riis introduces his book with the claim that the "worst crime" of the tenements is that they infect family life, which reflects Riis's concerns with moral disease and class violence.²⁸ Riis writes:

Long ago it was said that "one half of the world does not know how the other half lives." That was true then. It did not know because it did not care. The half that was on top cared little for the struggles, and less for the fate of those who were underneath, so long as it was able to hold them there and keep its own seat.²⁹

These words are stark and are meant to illicit an intrigued response from his readers. From the beginning through the end of his exposé, Riis presents to readers the idea that it would behoove the top half of the population to care about the bottom half because immoral values infect society and make it unsafe for all people. Immorality does not care what class you are a part of because it is a parasite that lurks beneath the surface and seeks to corrupt an entire community.

Throughout his book, Riis argues that society must compensate for the evils it has wrought upon the poorest members of their community by providing the impoverished with decent housing that can encourage the breeding of the "correct" type of morals. However, property owners recognized that they could make more money by decreasing the proportions of each individual room in their tenement houses, making them unwilling to build decent homes for their residents. Riis writes, "It was 'soon perceived by estate owners and agents of property that a greater percentage of profits could be realized by the conversion of houses and blocks into barracks, and dividing their space into smaller proportions capable of containing human life within four walls.'"³⁰

Not only were tenement dwellers cramped into continually decreasing spaces, they paid a large amount of their hard-earned money to live in those decrepit conditions. Riis was outraged by the exorbitant amount of money a tenement dweller must pay for rent, usually around \$8.50 per

²⁸ Gandal, 31.

²⁹ Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, 1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

month, for "...a single room on the top-story, so small that I was unable to get a photograph of it even by placing the camera outside the open door. Three short steps across either way would have measured its full extent."³¹ Riis argued that the only way to address the wrongdoings that have been thrust upon the poorest members of society is to build them decent homes. He writes, "Cognizant that most tenements would not disappear since suburban housing was too costly and impractical for most workers, he called for governmental regulation to make it 'unprofitable to own a bad tenement.' The state had the duty to tear down the worst buildings and force owners to remodel others."³²

Riis concludes his exposé by threatening the reader with a scene of social apocalypse. He writes, "The sea of a mighty population, held in falling fetters, heaves uneasily in the tenements. Once already our city...has felt the swell of its resistless flood. If it rise once more, no human power may avail to check it. The gap between the classes, in which it surges, unseen, unsuspected by the thoughtless, is widening day by day."³³

Riis's book educated numerous middle- and upper-class Americans about the realities of tenement life and evoked a compassionate feeling among readers about the necessity of reform. "*How the Other Half Lives* stirred the conscience of a generation of young activists, many of whom worked to blot out the ills which Riis described....After *How the Other Half Lives*, the public searched out books such as Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) and William T. Stead's *If Christ Came to Chicago* (1895)."³⁴ Riis was established as an expert of urban problems, giving his voice a new sense of authority among contemporary reformers. Ten years after *How the Other Half Lives* was published, tenements were demolished to provide space for public parks and other green spaces and

³¹ Ibid., 12.

³² Lane, 64.

³³ Gandal, 31.

³⁴ Lane, 67-8.

a Tenement House Commission was formed. A Tenement Law was also passed that stipulated that dramatic improvements must be made to immigrant housing.³⁵

IV.) Power of Jacob Riis's Photographs.

Riis's photographs were the most captivating component of *How the Other Half Lives*. Riis's book was the first book on any subject to employ a large number of halftone reproductions from original photographs.³⁶ "While others before Riis had written of New York's slums, notes Peter Hales, 'it was the photographs that provided the real revolutionary aspect.'"³⁷ By providing visual truths to statistics and other factual accounts, Riis engaged his reader's ethos and invited them into the tenements so they could see the reality of daily life there. "An essayist Oliver Wendell Holmes famously put it, the photograph offers a 'mirror with a memory,' it merely reflects the world back on itself. This was Riis's understanding of photography, with which he could let 'in the light where it was so much needed.'"³⁸

Photographs could persuade the middle class and provide an individual identity to the tenement's residents. This offered a unique opportunity for Riis's readers to better understand the numerous problems and the parasitical results of the tenement life without actually having to step foot there:

The intensification of the visual moment gave viewers a sense of risk-free access, whereby they could temporarily share a space with the poor (while being "spared the vulgar sounds and odious scents"), and in this sense of shared space lay a powerful appeal of ethos....Not only did Riis enter the tenements himself, he lit the way for others, insisting that their collective fate was bound up with what they saw and that the long-term sanctity of their own domestic spaces depended on making Christian family life possible throughout the city.³⁹

³⁵ Edward T. O'Donnell, "Pictures Vs. Words? Public History, Tolerance, and the Challenge of Jacob Riis." *The Public Historian* 26, no. 3 (2004): 15, Online.

³⁶ Gandal, 64.

³⁷ O'Donnell, 12-3.

³⁸ Quirke, 558.

³⁹ Christopher Carter, "Writing with Light: Jacob Riis's Ambivalent Exposures," *College English* 71, no. 2: 122, Online.

This “you are there” approach engaged Riis’s readers in an emotional way that encouraged them to learn more about tenement housing and advocate for political reforms.

V.) Analysis of Selected Photographs from *How the Other Half Lives*.

Riis’s photograph titled, “Bohemian cigarmakers at work in their tenement” (see photo one) provides a social commentary on the dangers of mixing work with home life because this combination challenges middle-class ideals. At the time *How the Other Half Lives* was published, more than half of all Bohemians in New York City were cigarmakers.⁴⁰ Riis explains the Bohemian’s living and working condition to his readers:

The manufacturer who owns, say, from three or four to a dozen or more tenements contiguous to his shop, fills them up with these people, charging them outrageous rents, and demanding often even a preliminary deposit of five dollars “key money;” deals them out tobacco by the week, and devotes the rest of his energies to the paring down of wages to within a peg or two of the point where the tenant rebels in desperation. When he does rebel, he is given the alternative of submission, or eviction with entire loss of employment.⁴¹

Riis’s photograph “Bohemian cigarmakers at work in their tenement” accompanies this description of the Bohemians. In his photograph, Riis hopes to convey to his readers the threat this type of job instability and an inability to escape work in the home poses to the Bohemian families and upon the overall community.

For Bohemians, the home was generally an extension of the factory, meaning there was never an opportunity for the family to take a break from work. The mother in the photograph, whom Riis believes should be taking care of the family, is working alongside her husband and children, bringing into question the proper roles for each gender. Critic Reginald Twigg provides a detailed analysis of this photograph:

For many Victorians, the home was increasingly seen as a safe environment, one that provided refuge from the toils of the workplace. This boundary violated by the image of each member of the family involved in the production of cigars. The children, presumably, must surrender play or school time in order to help the family earn a living. Each family member participates in the same economic activity, suggesting in its subtlety that the “domestic” activities of the family are dysfunctional: the gendered roles between mother, father, and children become indistinguishable from each other....If the women

⁴⁰ Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, 137-8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 138.

spends nearly every waking hour at work for money, this is done directly at the expense of the “proper” supervision of the family. In other words, this image affiliated itself to an ideology in which women’s labor should remain in domestic operations, hence hidden, while men’s labor provides the support of “the family,” meaning the traditionally-defined nuclear family, and is a central contributory factor to juvenile delinquency and other crimes. In this way, his “Bohemian” subjects were appropriated to naturalize the middle-class family and its attendant gender, generational, and age relations by “illustrating” the “dangers” of any subversion of it.⁴²

Twigg argues that women who worked outside of the realms of domesticity were dangerous to American culture because they challenged middle-class ideals of the “proper family” structure. Therefore, Twigg argues that Riis hoped to convey this threat through his photograph to warn people of the destruction that could result from dismissing the dangers of the mixture of work and family in tenement houses.

In *How the Other Half Lives*, Riis describes to his readers the horrific reality of seven-cent lodging houses. He writes:

Usually the ten- and seven-cent lodgings are different grades of the same abomination. Some sort of an apology for a bed, with mattress and blanket, represents the aristocratic purchase of the tramp who, by a lucky stroke of beggary, has exchanged the chance of an empty box or ash-barrel for shelter on the quality floor of one of these “hotels.” A strip of canvas, strung between rough timbers, without covering of any kind, does for the couch of the seven-cent lodger...It is not the most secure perch in the world. Uneasy sleepers roll off at intervals, but they have not far to fall to the next tier of bunks, and the commotion that ensues is speedily quieted by the boss and his club.⁴³

Riis’s photograph “Seven cent lodging house” (see photo two) accompanies the description of the horrific overnight-lodging conditions. In this photograph, Riis comments on the fallibility of statistics. Critic Cindy Weinstein provides an analysis of Riis’s intentions with his photograph:

The bottom row of sleepers is relatively focused (through body parts do dangle and intersect, making it somewhat difficult to determine what part belongs to whom) in comparison to the top row of sleepers whose bodies remain unseen, even though the indentations made by their sleeping bodies are visible. Furthermore, there are more hammocks in the background of the photograph, but one’s difficulty in determining whether or not they are occupied only increases with the increasing blurriness of the image. The suggestion of more bodies lingers even as it is impossible to register their present. Here, the photograph testifies to the impossibility of enumeration. It is like a failed statistic.⁴⁴

⁴² Reginald Twigg, “The Performative Dimension of Surveillance: Jacob Riis’ *How the Other Half Lives*.” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 12, no. 4: 313-4, Online.

⁴³ Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, 87.

⁴⁴ Weinstein, 208, Online.

One of Riis's main goals when publishing *How the Other Half Lives* was to challenge the authority of statistics and provide a voice to the unrepresented numbers who live in the tenements. Through "Seven cent lodging house," Riis provides readers with the opportunity to more clearly understand the fallibility of statistics because he illustrates how it is impossible to count the numerous tenement dwellers and represent their plight with reliable numbers.

VI.) Criticism of *How the Other Half Lives* and Jacob Riis's Photographs.

Critics have challenged the credibility of Riis's photographs for numerous reasons. In his autobiography, Riis recounted the tenement dwellers' reaction to his group photographing them:

"It is not too much to say that our party carried terror wherever it went. . . . The spectacle of half a dozen strange men invading a house in the midnight hour armed with big pistols which they shot off recklessly was hardly reassuring, however sugary our speech, and it was not to be wondered at if the tenants bolted through windows and down fire-escapes wherever we went." The factual basis of the photograph would seem to be undermined by the terror introduced by Riis and his staff.⁴⁵

The power dynamics that were a result of this intrusion in the early morning hours by Riis favored Riis and his team because it provided him with an opportunity to capture the darkness and horrible conditions of tenement life.⁴⁶ The flash powder Riis used often shocked his subjects and exaggerated the actual appearances of the tenements because it provided harsh shadows and lighting.⁴⁷ All of these factors have led critics to question the credibility of Riis's photographs.

Critics also argue that the imbalance between Riis's photographs and his written, degrading words is impossible to reconcile. "Why would a photographer-writer portray his immigrant subjects in such profound and humane terms in his pictures, and in such superficial, even stereotypical terms in his words?"⁴⁸ For example, in *How the Other Half Lives*, Riis wrote, "Granted, that the Chinese are in no sense a desirable element of the population, that they serve no useful purpose here, whatever

⁴⁵ Ibid., 203.

⁴⁶ Shawn Michelle Smith, "The Half of Whiteness," *English Language Notes* 44, no. 2: 190, Online.

⁴⁷ Curtis.

⁴⁸ Bill Hug, "Walking the Ethnic Tightwire: Ethnicity and Dialectic in Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*," *Journal of American Culture* 20, no. 4: 41-2, Online.

they may have done elsewhere in other days, yet to this it is a sufficient answer that they are here, and that, having let them ill, we must make the best of it.”⁴⁹ Critics are stumped as to how these racial and demeaning words can accompany the photographs of one of the most famous tenement reformers in American history.

Critic Bill Hug presents his readers with numerous possible explanations for this language discrepancy. He provides scholar Peter Hales’s analysis on the reformer’s inconsistency. Hales argues that Riis intentionally used harsh words to play rhetorical games with his audience in order to intensify the power of his photographs.⁵⁰ Riis experienced the hostility that Americans had toward immigrants because he was an immigrant himself and was viewed as a “lesser breed” because of his foreign status. Hales says, “Given the awareness that his words influences his audience’s reaction to his pictures, is it possible that Riis employs his personal words to manipulate his readers in various ways? Could his simplicity as thinker and writer and his acceptance of Anglo-Saxon superiority, like his clumsiness as photographer of the immigrant hordes, be poses, too?”⁵¹ Riis learned as a reporter that any written work must please the intended audience. Therefore, Riis realized that *How the Other Half Lives* must use the language that his middle-class readers preferred in order for them to acknowledge his book as a credible source of information on tenement life. Because of this, Riis may have been intentional in his word choice and used the written language to add shock-value to his photographs and enhance the overall themes of *How the Other Half Lives*.

Critic Shawn Michelle Smith challenges Hales’s analysis and argues that Riis intentionally used degrading words in his exposé in order to prove his middle-class status to his readers. She writes:

The “white-skinned” American community that Riis proclaims as his own was, at the time of his pronouncements, a contested and shifting category of national privilege. As a Northern European

⁴⁹ Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, 102.

⁵⁰ Hug, 46.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 46-7.

immigrant, Riis could aspire to belong to that class, but he could not necessarily presume inclusion in the community of white [supremacist] Americans jealously guarded by nativists. Indeed, I would like to argue that one of the many functions of Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* is the projection of Riis himself as a "white" Americans through the performance of a "white" gaze.⁵²

Therefore, it can also be argued that Riis used his words not to evoke a certain response from his middle-class readers, but to affirm his place in middle-class American society and prove to his readers that he deserved the same respect and social status that accompanies the words "middle-class white American."

Numerous other critics argue that the main fault with Riis's exposé and photographs is that they do not take into consideration the subject's needs. Many of Riis's photographs may have been taken without the subject's consent and may have startled these impoverished subjects out of their sleep. Also, critics say that Riis may not have taken into consideration the type of reforms his subjects truly desired. Riis's Danish background caused him to value green space, a belief in hard work, and recognition of the importance of family in developing moral people and values.⁵³

However, the question of whether or not this is what his subjects valued is contested by critics.

Critic Paul Messaris writes:

In his own estimation, his major achievement was to convince the municipal authorities to condemn and demolish a cluster of particularly troublesome tenements—even though, as [Tom] Buk-Swienty notes, this demolition took place without clear alternative housing plans for the people involved. To put it bluntly, then, however well-intentioned Riis may have been, he used his photographs to pursue goals that did not always match the aspirations of the people whose lives he was documenting.⁵⁴

Not only did Riis use degrading language in *How the Other Half Lives*, but the reforms that were a result of this book were not necessarily ones that were needed by the people Riis was trying to help. Riis photographed these people "for their own good" without giving them much say as to what their "good" should look like.⁵⁵

⁵² Smith, 189.

⁵³ Lane, 13-4.

⁵⁴ Paul Messaris, "Review Essay: Visual Communication and Social Advocacy." *Journal of Mass Communication* 60, no. 1: E3, Online.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, E6.

VII.) Conclusion.

Riis thought that the newspaper was a vehicle through which he could protest slum conditions by accompanying his reporting with photographs. Riis's photographs let light in where it was most needed and provided a unique opportunity for his readers to better understand life in the tenements. The photographs also helped to individualize a group of people that was dehumanized by only be labeled as a number. By placing his readers in the tenements, Riis engaged his reader's emotional appeal, a tactic that is employed by photojournalists today. Critics have challenged Riis's ethics and his use of racial words in his book *How the Other Half Lives*. The question of if the reforms Riis advocated for actually improved the lives of tenement dwellers is still contested among critics. In *How the Other Half Lives*, Riis united his talents as a writer and photographer to expose the evil of poverty in New York City and its destructive effects on society. His exposé altered the public's opinion of slum housing, brought political reforms, and impacted the way contemporary and subsequent journalists and social reformers convey the poor's plight to their communities.

Appendix

Photo One. “Bohemian cigarmakers at work in their tenement.”

⁵⁶Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, 143.



Photo Two. “Seven cent lodging house.”

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

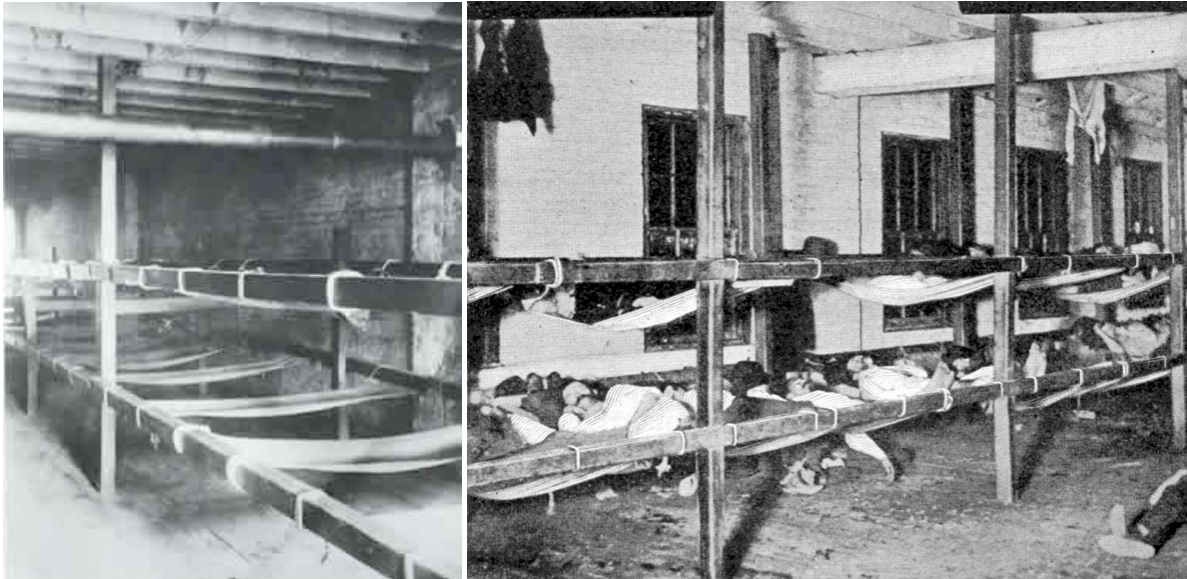


Photo Credits from Title Page:

“In the home of an Italian ragpicker, Jersey Street” (*Ibid.*, 51).

“Bandits’ Roost” (*Ibid.*, 63).

Bibliography.

Carter, Christopher. "Writing with Light: Jacob Riis's Ambivalent Exposures." *College English* 71, no. 2: 117-141. Online. Accessed March 15, 2010.

Carter examines Jacob Riis's contributions to the public's interest in multimodal rhetoric and how this contributed to present-day muckrakers portrayal of social issues. He also comments on the inconsistency between Riis's written words and his photographs.

Curtis, James. "Making Sense of Documentary Photography." *History Matters*. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/photos/> (accessed March 15, 2010).

Curtis's essay examines documentary images that are presented in textbooks but are never given their full credit as historical evidence. His essay provides a history of documentary photography and offers examples of questions to ask when examining a documentary photograph.

Gandal, Keith. *The Virtues of the Vicious: Jacob Riis, Stephen Crane, and the Spectacle of the Slum*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Gandal examines how the slum became the main source of spectacle news at the end of the 19th century. New concepts and styles for representing urban poverty, such as photography, provided people with the opportunity to better understand impoverished individuals. Gandal argues that Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* is the first book that includes photographs and presented ethnographic and psychological details that increased reader's awareness about slum housing.

Hug, Bill. "Walking the Ethnic Tightwire: Ethnicity and Dialectic in Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*." *Journal of American Culture* 20, no. 4: 41-53. Online. Accessed March 15, 2010.

Hug examines the messages Jacob Riis's photographs conveyed to his audience and how different methods of their exhibition, such as exhibits, illustrated sketches in newspapers, and their integration into *How the Other Half Lives*, impacted viewers.

"Jacob Riis's Reform Photography." Fulbright American Studies Institute. <http://www.uic.edu/dept>

s/oeefasi/riissequence.html (accessed March 15, 2010).

This web project provides analysis of Jacob Riis's photographs and the messages these images convey to viewers.

Lane, James B. *Jacob A. Riis and the American City*. Port Washington, New York: National University Publications, 1974.

Lane's essay provides a biography of Riis's life and his dedication to focusing on the plight of the urban poor and their living conditions. Riis thought that a poor and decrepit living environment caused urban crime and poverty. Lane focuses on Riis's social consciousness and accomplishments in his examination of Riis's life and his contributions to American society.

Messaris, Paul. "Review Essay: Visual Communication and Social Advocacy." *Journal of Mass Communication* 60, no. 1: E1-E8. Online. Accessed March 15, 2010.

Messaris's essay reviews books about the role of visual communication in social advocacy work, paying particular attention to how Jacob Riis employed photographs in his book *How the Other Half Lives* in order to illicit an emotional response from readers.

O'Donnell, Edward T. "Pictures Vs. Words? Public History, Tolerance, and the Challenge of Jacob Riis." *The Public Historian* 26, no. 3 (2004): 7-26. Online. Accessed March 15, 2010.

Jacob Riis became famous through his photographs and accompanying muckraking prose. Despite claims that Riis was a racist and not a true social reformer, O'Donnell argues that Riis's tolerance and his bold use of words and images provided contemporaries with the opportunity to understand poverty and the complex immigration questions that pervaded the late 1890s.

Quirke, Carol "Picturing the Poor: Jacob Riis' Reform Photography." *Reviews in American History* 36 (2008): 557-565. http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/reviews_in_american_history/v036/36.4.quirke.html (accessed March 15, 2010).

Quirke's essay reviews Daniel Czitrom and Bonnie Yockelson's book *Rediscovering Jacob Riis: Exposure Journalism and Photography in Turn-of-the-Century New York*. The authors use their first-hand knowledge and resources to analyze Riis's journalism, reformer, and photographer careers.

Riis, Jacob A. *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929.

Jacob Riis's book examines the horrific living conditions of New York City's impoverished residents. His exposé impacted society and encouraged reforms that changed the lives of thousands of city-dwellers. Riis's work and reliance on facts and photographs initiated the crusading style of journalism that was later adopted by numerous muckrakers and social reformers.

Riis, Jacob A. *The Making of an American*. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1940.

Jacob Riis reflects on his childhood in Ribe, Demark, his assimilation into American culture, and his rise from poverty to a steady job as a reporter in New York City. He recounts his photojournalism experience and reflects upon his passion for social change and reforms.

Smith, Shawn Michelle. "The Half of Whiteness." *English Language Notes* 44, no. 2: 189-194.

Online. Accessed March 15, 2010.

Smith's essay discusses the racist language in Jacob Riis's book *How the Other Half Lives*. She presents arguments about the inherent hierarchy of white culture in Riis's photographs and how middle-class, white American values impact Riis's depiction of minorities, immigrants, and African Americans and the words Riis used to define these people.

Twigg, Reginald. "The Performative Dimension of Surveillance: Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 12, no. 4: 305-328. Online. Accessed March 15, 2010.

Twigg's essay explores the impacts of Jacob Riis's photographs upon his reader's understanding of *How the Other Half Lives*. Twigg examines the effects of this documentary-style of journalism and the ways in which Riis depicts race, gender, and class identity.

Wagner, Robert W. "Review: Classic Visual Images." *A V Communication Review* 19, no. 4 (1971): 471-476. Online. Accessed March 15, 2010.

Wagner's essay reviews Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* and Dorothea Lange and Paul Schuster Taylor's *An American Exodus*. He examines the contributions of these photographers on political reforms and the ability of their images to impact the community's understanding of these social issues.

Weinstein, Cindy. "How Many Others Are There in the Other Half? Jacob Riis and the Tenement Population." *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 24, no. 2 (2002): 195-216. Online. Accessed March 15, 2010.

Weinstein's essay references Jacob Riis's book *How the Other Half Lives* and examines the tenement's immigrant population, Riis's professional and reformer career, and the impact of Riis's photographs upon political decision makers.

Yount, Sylvia L. "Consuming Drama: Everett Shinn and the Spectacular City." *American Art* 6, no. 4 (1992): 86-109. Online. Accessed March 15, 2010.

Yount's essay explores the contributions that Everett Shinn and other photographers, such as Jacob Riis, had on people's perception of city life and its inhabitants, particularly immigrants.