

Tenement Living - "How the Other Half Lives"

Objective:

Students will use Jacob Riis' novel, *How the Other Half Lives*, to see what life was like to many poor immigrants during the 1890's.

Students will understand that primary sources can help us to understand people, places, and events from the past.

Background Information about *How the Other Half Lives* - from Wikipedia:

In the 1890s many people in upper- and middle-class society were unaware of the dangerous conditions in the slums among poor immigrants. Jacob Riis, a Danish immigrant who himself could not originally find much work, hoped to expose the squalor of the 19th-century [Lower East Side](#) of Manhattan. After a successful career as a police reporter,^[1] he published a photojournal documenting these conditions using graphic descriptions, sketches, photographs, and statistics. Riis blamed the apathy of the monied class for the condition of the New York slums, and assumed that as people were made more aware of these conditions they would be motivated to help eradicate them.

In 1889 Riis wrote a magazine article exposing some of the harsh conditions of New York slums which was published with a number of engravings of his photographs in [Scribner's Magazine](#).^[2] Due to its disturbing pictures and articles, the city's rich newspaper owners had refused to publish it.^[citation needed] Yet soon the article proved to be popular and Riis spent the better part of a year expanding it into the book *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York*, published by Scribner's Books in 1890.^[2] The book was also successful. Soon after its publication, *The New York Times* lauded its content, calling it a "powerful book".^[3]

The title of the book is a reference to a sentence by French writer [François Rabelais](#), who famously wrote in [Pantagruel](#): "one half of the world does not know how the other half lives" ("la moiytié du monde ne sçait comment l'autre vit").^[4]

In *How the Other Half Lives* Riis describes the system of tenement housing that had failed, as he claims, due to greed and neglect from wealthier people. He claims a correlation between the high crime rate, drunkenness and reckless behaviour of the poor and their lack of a proper home.^[5] Chapter by chapter he uses his words and photographs to expose the conditions inhabited by the poor in a manner that "spoke directly to people's hearts".^[2]

He ends *How the Other Half Lives* with a plan of how to fix the problem. He asserts that the plan is achievable and that the upper classes will not only profit financially from such ventures, but have a moral obligation to tend to them as well.^[6]

Because the recent invention of [flash photography](#), Riis was able to photograph the unlit areas of [tenements](#) and expose wretched working and living conditions. The harsh white light

from magnesium [flash powder](#) often caused a look of shock on the faces of those photographed and was accepted as an indication of candid and objective photography.

How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York explained not only the living conditions in New York slums, but also the [sweatshops](#) in some tenements which paid workers only a few cents a day. The book explains the plight of working children; they would work in factories and at other jobs. Some children became garment workers and newsies (newsboys).

The effect was the tearing down of New York's worst tenements, sweatshops, and the reformation of the city's schools. The book led to a decade of improvements in Lower East Side conditions, with sewers, garbage collection, and indoor plumbing all following soon after, thanks to public reaction.

Introduction:

Students have learned the many reasons that people chose to immigrate to the United States and what their experiences and hardships may have been like doing so. Have students imagine what life was like for immigrants after they left Ellis Island and started life in a new and foreign country. What challenges would the immigrants have faced? How would they have dealt with these challenges? Record your ideas in your journal and be prepared to justify your thoughts to the class.

Lesson:

Day 1:

Explain the background of Jacob Riis and why he chose to write the book *How the Other Half Lives*.

Distribute a copy of an excerpt from Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies of the Tenements of New York*

www.sprintz.weebly.com/uploads/5/1/2/0/5120516/excerpt_from_jacob_riis-how_the_other_half_lives.doc

Read the excerpt individually, small group, or as an entire class. Have students record/highlight specific words and descriptions that paint a strong mental image of what living conditions were like, as described by Jacob Riis. This will take some time, as students will have to decipher many unfamiliar words and expressions used. After students have carefully read the excerpt, have them draw an illustration of what visual came to mind from the author's descriptions.

Day 2:

Students will share their illustrations and explain what words helped them to create their visual as they did.

Students will analyze photographs taken by Jacob Riis.

www.authentichistory.com/1898-1913/2-progressivism/2-riis/illustrations.html

We will now look at actual photos taken to show how tenement life was like in New York's lower east side. (This can be done as a whole class or in small groups. I think I would distribute a different picture for each group to analyze and then have them report their findings to the class.) Students need to summarize the evidence found in the picture to the class based on 4 concepts.

1. What evidence is in the picture of desperation and/or despair?
2. What evidence is in the picture of the immigrants' efforts and perceptions to improve their lives?
3. What evidence is there of the non-immigrant society to try to improve the immigrants' lives?
4. What evidence is found of success or failure in achieving goals?

These questions can be modified or added to...

Conclusion:

Discuss the students' findings from both the reading and photo analysis. To what extent do the primary sources tell us about many immigrants' experiences coming to America? Does Jacob Riis capture the immigrant experience accurately? Were all immigrants' experiences similar to those described by Riis?

Additional Lessons: I would definitely use these with my class! Great resource!!!

www.tenement.org - Students can use primary source documents to piece together information about specific people from the past and investigate their experiences living in tenements. This information can then be used to compare/contrast the experiences with those explained by Jacob Riis to give students various perspectives of tenement life.