



American Expression E0413 How the other half lives

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"How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York" is a ground-breaking work of photojournalism by Jacob Riis, published in 1890. Born in Denmark, Riis immigrated to the United States and experienced first-hand the dire poverty of New York City's slums. He rose to become a police reporter, which further exposed him to the harsh realities of poverty.

In "How the Other Half Lives," Riis used photography and descriptive narrative to spotlight the deplorable living conditions of New York's impoverished communities, particularly those in tenement houses. These congested dwellings were poorly ventilated, lacked natural light, and often housed multiple families in a single room.

Riis's work provided an unprecedented look into the daily lives of immigrants and the urban poor. He showed readers how families of ten or more were crammed into small, unsanitary spaces; how children worked in factories instead of attending school; and how the lack of adequate sewage and water systems led to rampant diseases. Riis also discussed social issues such as alcoholism, crime, and the struggle of single mothers.

Riis, however, did not just present a grim catalogue of conditions. He also argued for specific reforms, such as improved sanitation, enforcement of building regulations, the destruction of the worst slums, and better schools. By shedding light on the appalling circumstances endured by the city's impoverished residents, he aimed to inspire public action and intervention.

Riis's combination of investigative journalism with photography was innovative for its time. His pioneering use of flash powder enabled him to capture interior spaces that would have otherwise been too dark to photograph, bringing stark visual evidence of living conditions in the tenements.

"How the Other Half Lives" had a significant impact, both immediately and in the long term. It shocked the public and stirred a strong reaction, leading to increased awareness about the urban poor and catalyzing social reform. The work also played a role in the eventual implementation of new laws regarding tenements, sanitation, and labor.

Riis's work also inspired future generations of journalists and reformers, influencing the rise of the Progressive Era and shaping the development of muckraking journalism, a style characterized by exposés of corruption and societal ills.

In summary, "How the Other Half Lives" represents an enduring historical document that gives a voice to the voiceless. By revealing the harsh reality of the urban poor's living conditions, Riis initiated social and legislative reforms and helped pave the way for modern investigative journalism. His vivid descriptions and haunting photographs continue to serve as a potent reminder of the dire circumstances that a significant part of the population once endured, and the ongoing struggle against poverty and social inequality.

#### Questions for Discussion

1. In what ways does Jacob Riis's "How the Other Half Lives" influence our understanding of poverty and social inequality in the late 19th century America?
  2. Riis used photography to enhance his narrative and provide visual evidence of the conditions he was describing. What impact do you think this use of imagery had on the readers of the time, and how does it affect modern readers' perception of the text?
  3. Discuss the specific reforms Riis suggested in "How the Other Half Lives". How feasible were they during that period, and what might be their equivalents in today's society to address ongoing issues of poverty and housing?
  4. Riis's work played a significant role in catalyzing social reform and influencing the rise of the Progressive Era. What parallels and differences can you draw between societal issues and reform movements in Riis's time and the present day?
  5. "How the Other Half Lives" has been recognized as a pioneering example of muckraking journalism. How does this style of journalism impact society and politics? Do you think it is still relevant and effective in our current media landscape?
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