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How the Other Half Lives Paper

“How the Other Half Lives” by Jacob A. Riis provided the late 19th and early 20th century middle class with a glance into the environment that impoverished Americans and immigrants were forced to endure. Riis’s description of the various issues exhibited in the novel also provide insight into his own ideology, as well as his belief of where these issues originate from. The historical framework of Gilded Age New York is defined by horrifying conditions of tenements that caused disease and conducted inhumane behavior from its tenants, it is also defined by increased immigration, ethnic enclaves, and the roles immigrants assume in their new environments. Additionally, Riis identifies causes for the conditions of Gilded Age New York as greed from landlords and unpreparedness from the government in respect to overcrowding and sanitation. Finally, this paper will offer a critique on Riis’ view on immigrants and their ethnic enclaves, as well as provide support Riis’ views on the reason tenements were a disaster during this time period.

Firstly, Riis illustrates the harsh reality that was Gilded Age New York by describing the physical conditions of the tenements that led to disproportionate death rates, illnesses, and overall unsafe living for its residents. An exponential increase in urbanization created the demand from laborers for affordable housing near workplaces, resulting in the creation of tenements, which were brick structures with the purpose of housing those who worked in the city. As stated in the introduction, “three fourths of its people live in the tenements” and “more

than twelve hundred thousand persons call them home”.¹ Wealthy landlords saw these tenement buildings valuable due to the sheer volume of tenants they could fit into any one structure, disregarding ventilation and sunlight.² Furthermore, Riis quotes a physician that states “If we could see the air breathed by these poor creatures in their tenements it would show itself to be fouler than the mud of the gutters”, giving readers an idea of exactly how repulsive the air quality of these tenements were because of the lack of ventilation.³ To really emphasize the conditions of tenements during Gilded Age New York, Riis describes another summation from an old report on the tenements, stating “. . . until the entire premises reached the level of tenement-house dilapidation, containing, but sheltering not, the miserable hordes that crowded beneath mouldering, water-rotted roofs or burrowed among the rats of clammy cellars”.⁴ Using data, Riis makes the connection that during Gilded Age New York, the tenements were a place of unconscionable circumstances that had a significant effect on the health and livelihoods of tenants. For example, during the cholera endemic of 1866, the mortality rate rose to 195 in 1,000 individuals of Gotham Court.⁵ 19th century medicine did not lend itself to combat any endemic in a meaningful way, however close quarters and lack of sanitation in and around these tenements allow diseases to pass much easier from person to person. Many children, especially infants, were vulnerable to the repugnant air quality as described by the Bureau of Vital Statistics as “plainly due to suffocation in the foul air of an unventilated apartment”.⁶ In Blind Man’s Alley, it was reported by a sanitary official that within three years, 61 out of 138 newborn children had

¹ Riis, Jacob A. *How the Other Half Lives*. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011, 60.

² Riis, Jacob A. *How the Other Half Lives*, 64.

³ Riis, Jacob A. *How the Other Half Lives*, 70.

⁴ Riis, Jacob A. *How the Other Half Lives*, 64.

⁵ Riis, Jacob A. *How the Other Half Lives*, 83.

⁶ Riis, Jacob A. *How the Other Half Lives*, 65.

died, the majority under the age of one year.⁷ To conclude, the lack of ventilation combined with the occupancy of damp, disease infested cellars were just some of the harsh realities tenants had to cope with during the Gilded Age of New York City. With the data cited by Riis, it is clear, that these conditions had a causal relationship with the death rates, infant mortality rates, and overall life choices of the tenants who belonged to these buildings.

Secondly, Riis has identified two main causes to the harsh realities faced by Gilded Age New York City; greed exhibited by landlords and a city unprepared for the overcrowding that was a result of heightened immigration and urbanization rates. As previously mentioned, landlords saw the influx of newcomers as an opportunity to capitalize on the innovation of the tenement. As a result, landlords reduced the size of a residence at the expense of the tenant. Moreover, when New York adopted the “Tenement-House Act” of 1867 there was a strong opposition from landlords, who argued that an installation of windows for ventilation was an “infringement of personal rights”, as if to say the protections of tenants infringes on the freedoms of the landlord to harm the tenants.⁸ This argument being used by landlords to avoid having to make repairs, as repairs for tenants are inherently a reduction in their own profits. Additionally, Riis cites the argument of the landlord Daniel Murphy of Blind Man’s Alley. After ordered by the Board of Health to make repairs and clean older properties, Murphy made the argument in person to the Board of Health that “These people are not fit to live in a nice house. Let them go where they can, and let my house stand”.⁹ Murphy’s argument to the Board of Health is indicative of the feelings landlords felt towards tenants during this time. During this time, landlords had no incentive to improve the conditions of their properties because there were no

⁷ Riis, Jacob A. *How the Other Half Lives*, 85.

⁸ Riis, Jacob A. *How the Other Half Lives*, 69.

⁹ Riis, Jacob A. *How the Other Half Lives*, 81.

repercussions for failing to do so, and another unwitting tenant would move-in on the heels of the previous resident. In addition to the greed of landlords, the increasing population created an unforgiving burden on the public services of American cities in regard to sanitation, hospitals, and housing regulations that would have improved the lives of those residing in tenements. Riis takes note of the increased immigration into New York City by addressing ethnic enclaves that emerge as a result of immigration into urban areas. Riis is most critical of the Chinese and the Italian with statements such as “Like the Chinese, the Italian is a born gambler”.¹⁰ Riis would go on to say that Chinese men would rather gamble than eat most days, which is indicative of Riis’ view of immigration and ethnic enclaves.¹¹ Riis also describes the living conditions of ethnic enclaves, that do not differ from the conditions of the tenants previously mentioned. For example, Riis describes a living situation in the Seventh Ward that features a German family of nine that “lived in two rooms, one about ten feet square that served as parlor, bedroom, and eating-room”.¹² This German family has fallen victim to the overcrowding of tenements that led to the detrimental physical health of the working poor in New York City at the time. The conclusion that can be drawn from Riis’ description of these enclaves is that the immigrants experienced similar conditions to that of the American workers.

Overall, many struggles of the Gilded Age were a result of an urbanizing America with an unpreparedness found at all levels of government. This lack of protection for workers, consumers, and most specifically tenants are the areas of neglect that Riis is correct in identifying. Riis makes his viewpoint clear at the end of the novel when details solutions to the housing problems. He outlines the housing plans of A.T. White, who designed an updated

¹⁰ Riis, Jacob A. *How the Other Half Lives*, 96.

¹¹ Riis, Jacob A. *How the Other Half Lives*, 125.

¹² Riis, Jacob A. *How the Other Half Lives*, 92.

version of the tenement building that allowed for hundreds of families to reside in, each with their own private front door, a “perfect” fire-escape, and every room has windows facing the street or the yard in the middle of the structure.¹³ Additionally, Riis states that there are three ways of dealing with the tenement issue in New York, “By law. By remodeling and making the most out of the old houses. By building new, model tenements”.¹⁴ In the midst of Riis’ accurate interpretation of the tenement issue, his views on immigration are problematic, possibly because Riis sees himself as the model immigrant. For example, in his descriptions of Italians he makes them out to be incapable of adapting to the American way of life stating, “He not only knows no word of English, but he does not know enough to learn. This xenophobic tone is one that looks down on the immigrant and subsequently blames the immigrant for their situations, when instead the immigrant is victim to the same environment as many American workers during this time period. Riis’ inability to see the common interest of immigrants and the American working class to combat the tenement issue, as well as other issues, is the shortfall of Riis’ analysis of Gilded Age New York.

In conclusion, the neglect of all levels of government in respect to housing and labor regulation is the overarching issue of the Gilded Age, and Riis concurs with this interpretation through every description of tenement living and the disrespect hurled towards tenants. Increased immigration to city centers exacerbated this issue, and Riis’ views on immigrants seem indicative of how Americans during this time viewed the immigrants coming to take advantage of economic opportunity. Overall, Riis’ novel provides incredible insight into the lives of the American working class, that allowed for outrage and pushed for the Progressive Era in the years to come.

¹³ Riis, Jacob A. *How the Other Half Lives*, 264.

¹⁴ Riis, Jacob A. *How the Other Half Lives*, 257.

