

How the Other Half Lives



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JACOB A. RIIS

One of fourteen children, Jacob Riis spent much of his childhood and adolescence learning how to be a carpenter, before emigrating from Denmark to the United States in 1870. After some time working in Pennsylvania, he tried and failed to return to Europe to fight in the Franco-Prussian War, and soon ended up without stable lodging on the streets of Manhattan. After working a series of jobs outside the city, he finally returned in 1877 and began working as a reporter. Increasingly familiar with the Lower East Side slums near the police headquarters, Riis began writing and lecturing about the plight of the poor. He also started photographing tenement life to supplement his writings, and in 1888 he published the results of his forays into the slums with a flash camera: this work served as the basis for *How the Other Half Lives*. After that book's striking success, Riis became a regular lecturer on the national circuit. He continued writing and speaking, along with agitating for specific tenement house reforms, until his death in 1914.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

How the Other Half Lives is a contemporary account of New York in the late 1880s, a time of great political, social, and economic change in the United States. Industrialization meant that more and more people, whose parents and grandparents may have worked on farms or in small artisan occupations, increasingly labored at factories making mass-produced commodities. This transformation was accompanied by high rates of urbanization, as people crowded into the cities from the countryside, often in order to work at such factories. At the same time, upheavals in Europe led to an uptick in immigration, making New York a more cosmopolitan, diverse, and highly concentrated city than ever before. The tenement houses that Riis visits were obviously deeply affected by industrialization, urbanization, and immigration; they would also become the centerpiece of the reforms he proposed, reforms that would set a standard for similar proposals throughout the Progressive Era (1890s-1920s) that followed. Finally, the invention of flash photography in the late 1870s, as well as increasingly portable cameras, allowed Riis to enter dark homes and document what he saw there in a way that had never been possible before.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Riis drew on a number of literary influences, both fiction and non-fiction, in constructing a sensational narrative exposing the lives of New York's "other half." The British novelist Charles

Dickens, for instance, chronicled the lives of London's working poor in works like *Hard Times* and *Oliver Twist*. But Riis also drew on the "yellow journalism" of the 1880s, a kind of reporting that prized sensationalized stories and shocking news. Riis's success in yoking such sensationalism to earnest social critique would be copied by a number of other "muckraking" journalists over the next decades. Upton Sinclair, for instance, was deeply influenced by *How the Other Half Lives* in his 1906 exposé of immigrant workers in the meatpacking industry, entitled *The Jungle*. Riis's style would eventually prove influential to later generations as well, including the "new journalists" of the 1960s and 1970s like Gay Talese and Tom Wolfe, whose work also placed the reporter's first-person perspective at the center.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *How the Other Half Lives*
- **When Written:** 1888
- **Where Written:** New York
- **When Published:** 1890
- **Literary Period:** Social realism
- **Genre:** Photojournalism
- **Antagonist:** Poverty itself is almost personified in *How the Other Half Lives* as the villain of Riis's story, the source of economic desperation and moral depravity that ends up, in his account, affecting all of society for the worse.
- **Point of View:** While *How the Other Half Lives* is a work of investigative journalism, the kind of impersonal objectivity of a newspaper report is absent here: instead Riis uses the first person, both in describing his own travels through the New York neighborhoods and in freely expressing his own opinions and judgments about what he sees.

EXTRA CREDIT

Greening the Scene. Mulberry Bend, one of the many neighborhoods whose squalor Riis documents, ended up being demolished and turned into a park in 1897 (in large part due to his work).

All you can eat? Riis's first assignment as a reporter for the New York News Association was to report on a lavish lunch meeting at a luxury hotel, the Astor House, while on an empty stomach himself.



PLOT SUMMARY

Jacob Riis launches into his book, which he envisions as a

document that both explains the state of lower-class housing in New York today and proposes various steps toward solutions, with a quotation about how the “other half lives” that underlines New York’s vast gulf between rich and poor. Indeed, he directs his work explicitly toward readers who have never been in a tenement and who know little about the living conditions there (even if Riis will go on to expose such ignorance as disingenuous).

Riis first fills in some background about the history of New York tenements, which once belonged to some of the city’s wealthiest families. As industrialization increased over the course of the nineteenth century, the rising rates of immigration (both from abroad and from more rural areas of the country) that ensued caused these families to move out of the city. The buildings’ owners then began to subdivide them into cramped, windowless apartments for the new arrivals streaming in. Riis describes these tenements as increasingly overcrowded, filthy, and prone to disease: while cholera epidemics led to some desire for reform, owners pushed back, loath to spend more money on tenement buildings than they were forced to.

Riis moves on to describing the current state of tenements, which more and more can be found all over the city, though concentrated in “lower New York.” Tenements are home to a population that is cosmopolitan but also segregated by national origin, ethnicity, and race, between the Irish, Chinese, Germans, Italians, Bohemians, Jews, African-Americans, and other groups. Riis asks his reader to visit places like Blind Man’s Alley with him, a particularly squalid area home to shocking corruption. Then he describes the Italian population of New York tenements, characterizing it as hard-working but also violent and sometimes corrupt. Nearby, the “Bend” is home to a number of “[stale-beer dives](#)” hidden inside tenements, at least until police raids attempt to stamp them out. Riis is particularly critical of the “tramps” who spend time there without even trying to work, compared to thieves who, often desperate from poverty, find themselves involved in a life of crime.

Riis describes another neighborhood, Chinatown, although here he is also highly suspicious of and prejudiced toward this population, which he thinks is at least for now incapable of assimilating to “mainstream” American society. From there he moves to discussing the “Hebrew quarter,” home mostly to Jews, whom Riis describes with the aid of ethnic stereotypes and prejudices. These neighborhoods are also the places where much of New York’s relatively cheap clothing is made, and Riis explores the appalling conditions that have enabled the city to become such a manufacturing center. While Jews tend to work making clothing, Bohemians, according to Riis, are clustered around cigar factories. Riis defends Bohemians against the prejudices that are often leveled against them: he thinks that for this group, as for others, education will enable them to learn English and eventually convert to Christianity. Similarly, he

argues that African-Americans, only several decades outside of slavery, have shown themselves to be capable of moral “improvement” as a group (here as elsewhere, even when Riis defends a group against certain prejudices, he continues to make sweeping judgments about entire groups of people).

Riis argues that the lack of light, ventilation, green spaces, and any kind of beauty is highly detrimental to those living in New York’s tenement neighborhoods. Instead, they live in desperation and precariousness until their death, when too many of them (since their families lack money for burial) are dumped in the [Potter’s Field](#), that is, in a common grave. Children are in an especially precarious position in these areas, although Riis acknowledges the work of some charities and houses, like the Foundling Asylum, specifically directed toward children—although these are not enough to mitigate other dangers specific to poor babies and children, like the practice of “baby-farming,” letting infants die so that their life insurance can be collected.

Riis is particularly concerned about the danger of alcohol on young people, since beer is so prevalent in these neighborhoods and so easily accessible to children. If they aren’t properly cared for and given direction from a young age, he argues, they can easily become gang members; Riis then spends some time giving an ethnographic sketch of New York’s gangs, both condemning their crime and asking readers to understand how certain conditions have led to their behaviors. He uses similar reasoning to defend women who have become prostitutes, arguing that the economic realities of tenement neighborhoods often leave them without other options. At the same time, Riis reserves some of his greatest scorn for beggars and paupers, those who are unwilling to work (even in illegal work) and prefer to receive charity from the state. Work is one key part of ending the cycle of poverty, he argues, though the city’s current institutions, from asylums and hospitals to prisons to workhouses, hardly create a proper work ethic.

Riis introduces another reason for his readers to care about and want to transform New York’s housing crisis: the vast difference between the wealthy and the poor will only continue to increase discontent, he argues, and eventually the poor will rise up in violence against the privileged. He traces certain attempts at reform and begins to propose others: he suggests, for instance, that businesspeople consider investing in tenement-house reform—but only as long as they accept moderate, not greed-driven profits. It’s not practical to get rid of tenements entirely, he thinks: instead, it’s important to think creatively about how to build new model tenements, reform existing ones through improved business models, and in general work within public-private partnerships in order to transform living conditions. As he concludes, he cautions again that inaction is just as dangerous as trying and failing to reform, since the most desperate elements of New York’s population cannot last much longer without rebelling and inciting violence

throughout the city.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jacob Riis – The narrator and protagonist of the book, Riis is a Danish immigrant himself—though we would never know that from simply reading *How the Other Half Lives*. Instead, although Riis faced similarly precarious conditions as those of the New York tenement residents he portrays, he positions himself as a “true” (that is, white, Christian) American like his imagined reader. However, he also adopts the viewpoint of a privileged observer and guide: as a newspaper reporter, he’s familiar with the tenement-house system and is eager to lead his readers metaphorically through the alleys and buildings he describes. Riis has a deep-seated commitment to reducing poverty by exposing unsafe living conditions, corruption, and shocking tales of destitution, and his social commitments and sensationalist literary techniques would prove enormously influential for other Progressive-era reformers. Suspicious of certain ethnic identities—especially those he believes are not properly assimilating—and quick to characterize entire groups as a whole, whether pejoratively or not, he also asks for compassion rather than condemnation on behalf of lower-class African-Americans and women. Riis also denounces greed and corruption among New York’s wealthiest classes, as well as among those who have climbed the economic ladder within tenement neighborhoods; but he also sees business and commercial interests as a possibly productive source of collaboration for reform.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Inspector Byrnes – The Chief Inspector of New York’s police force, Inspector Byrnes is a regular source of information and anecdotes regarding the residents of New York’s tenements. Riis often either quotes him explicitly or refers to his knowledge.

Superintendent Murray – Another member of the police force whom Riis relies on for information.

Miss Ellen Collins – A philanthropist whose business strategy for buying, repairing, and maintaining model tenements Riis proposes as a sustainable model for reform.

Mr. A.T. White – A Brooklyn builder who has also been involved in tenement-house reform by constructing new tenements with decent living conditions.

Dr. Louis L. Seaman – A chief of staff at the hospitals of Blackwell’s Island, whom Riis cites regarding the difficult conditions of asylums for the poor.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



HOUSING, REFORM, AND IMPROVEMENT

Although the experiences and struggles of the urban poor that Riis documents are complex, for him they can ultimately be reduced to a single glaring issue: housing. In *How the Other Half Lives*, living conditions are isolated as the source of moral ills, of poverty and corruption, and of the alarming gap between rich and poor. But as a result, housing is also identified as the major means of counteracting poverty, becoming the centerpiece to Riis’s appeals for reform.

The narrator often employs a tone of horror and dismay at the conditions in tenement houses, a kind of housing whose history Riis explores and whose degeneration he recounts in detail. Indeed, part of the story Riis is telling is a historical account of housing in New York, a story about the gradual abandonment of the city center by the wealthy, who moved out to the suburbs and left the tenements to immigrants and the poor. Described as dark, dingy, loud, and even dangerous, these tenements are crowded and filled to the brim. Their inhabitants are thus deprived of the stable, pleasant domestic sphere that Riis considers to be a human right. Outside the tenements, the situation is no better: Riis is almost as appalled by the lack of parks and gardens in these neighborhoods as by the unsafe living conditions he explores. While more privileged New Yorkers can enjoy places like Central Park, he argues, the poor are deprived of green, beautiful spaces, which for him is just as harmful to their well-being as living in a squalid, rundown apartment.

The avowed aim of *How the Other Half Lives* is a didactic one—by instructing readers of the real state of affairs in certain areas of New York, Riis hoped to spark political and social reform. The evocative descriptions of the tenements are thus meant not just to bewail unjust conditions but to reveal how city leaders and private citizens might transform them for the better, even if the solutions Riis proposes might sometimes seem minor and inadequate. Indeed, an ethos of improvement pervades *How the Other Half Lives*, one that situates Riis within a general confidence during his time that society’s problems could be resolved through gradual, limited change rather than, for instance, political revolution or extreme transformations. But by limiting his sphere of analysis to the question of housing, Riis is able to propose specific, actionable schemes such as repairing ailing tenement buildings or creating small pockets of

urban gardens, which could go some way toward improving the standard of living in the city.



POVERTY AND MORALITY

In nineteenth-century America (as in other times and places), one common explanation of poverty was that the poor were responsible for their own condition. Stereotyped as being lazy, impressionable, and prone to vice, their struggles were thought to be inevitable or even just retribution for their sins. Much of *How the Other Half Lives* is concerned with what Riis does consider moral failures, as he delves at length into alcoholism, prostitution, and parents' abandonment of their children. But he also turns accepted social judgment on its head, arguing that poverty and squalor are not the result but the *cause* of corrupted morals.

Riis turns a sympathetic eye, for instance, on women who are unable to find steady work and who resort to accepting payment for sex. Rather than reacting with shock and disgust—two widespread and socially sanctioned responses to what was known as the “disease” of prostitution—Riis argues for compassion and understanding toward these women. Similarly, he explains much of the petty crime so common in New York slums as stemming from society's failure to enroll the poorest children in school and to allow their families to look after them. Instead, he describes how many of these children find their way to the streets, where older, more seasoned thieves teach them to beg and steal. Riis's evocative and often painful descriptions of squalid living conditions in New York's slums are meant not to condemn the residents themselves for living in such a way, but rather to expose how easy it can be for people in such desperate straits to commit crimes (legal or moral).

By lingering over specific and often dramatic signs of destitution, and by tracing people's behavior back to their socioeconomic conditions, Riis argues that social assumptions about the moral degradation of the poor are wrongheaded, their understanding of cause and effect reversed. By showing that the poor are forced to act in ways that society condemns, he suggests that tackling the root causes of poverty, rather than engaging in hand-wringing over certain behaviors among the poor, is the best means of resolving both social inequality and society's moral ills.



DIVERSITY, COSMOPOLITANISM, AND ETHNIC PREJUDICE

One salient feature of the parts of New York that Riis examines is the diversity of ethnicities, languages, and traditions to be found in the poorest areas of the city. Already a journalist and photographer, Riis also puts on the hat of ethnographer, studying the specific and distinct cultural practices of many of these groups. But even as he

argues for greater equality for certain marginalized populations, his typologies tend to reduce many of the people he studies to stereotypes about their ethnic, racial, or national identity.

Riis tends to explain behavior by culture—even as he objects to others explaining poverty by immorality. Acknowledging a common stereotype linking Jews to greed and penny-pinching, for instance, he claims that young Jewish children of Polish heritage know how to count before they learn how to talk. Italians are cheerful and exuberant, Irishmen are quick to anger, Germans love order: not all Riis's sweeping characterizations are negative, but they do engage in what today we might call cultural essentialism—that is, reducing people to their cultural heritage and grouping them according to stereotypes.

Sometimes, this kind of characterization enables Riis to make arguments *against* the social and economic exclusion of certain groups. Long before the era of Civil Rights, Riis points out the unfairness of barring African-Americans from certain buildings and even entire neighborhoods. If he is less than eager to differentiate among people within racial groups, he does at least pay attention to the ways people are discriminated against on the basis of those identities.

For Riis, though, multiculturalism in and of itself is not a value to be celebrated—instead, with enough time and work, he thinks, new arrivals in America should leave behind their old identities and adapt their behavior to mainstream attitudes. He reserves his harshest critiques for the Chinese immigrant population in New York, who he says have failed to assimilate into “American” lifestyles. In his suspicion and disapproval of a number of their customs, this example reveals that there is a limit to Riis's ability to imaginatively sympathize with customs and identities very different from his own—even as he also exposes the harsh reality behind the “American dream” that so many of these immigrants came to the United States to seek.



CORRUPTION

As he moves throughout the slums and tenements of the city, Riis draws on his experience as an investigative reporter in uncovering the relationship between money, power, and poverty in and beyond these areas. Indeed, in addition to simply recounting the sights he sees, Riis exposes the underlying connections between the shocking conditions of New York's poor as well as the complex, subtle manipulations that often work to keep them in their place.

For instance, Riis lingers over the relationship between saloons and political leadership: many of the rum shops crowding the tenements, which he contrasts with the coffee shops, parks, and libraries that could ideally take their place, are actually owned by some of the most powerful political leaders in the city—leaders who turn a profit off of the alcoholism of a

population deprived of other cultural or social entertainment options. Rent gouging is another way the poor are exploited, according to Riis's account: again, it is the most vulnerable populations who are the most likely to pay exorbitant prices on their rundown or even dangerous tenements, as landlords grow wealthy off of them.

Much of this is allowed to carry on, Riis argues, because of the relative neglect that characterizes the slums. Because policemen tend to turn a blind eye, and because more privileged people can easily forget that these places even exist, corruption can continue unchecked. Just as diseases like scarlet fever spread from block to block among the tenements without medical authorities taking action, so too do fraud and financial abuse snake their way through the alleys Riis explores. The graphs and tables that supplement Riis's narrative are meant to provide evidence for these arguments, adding a quantitative claim of authority to the more descriptive, humanizing portrayals of life in the slums.

By analyzing the causes and sources of corruption, Riis aims to expose the way in which the city's most vulnerable residents are taken advantage of by the more powerful—and are trapped in a cycle of poverty that becomes self-perpetuating, even if ultimately resolvable through reform.



PHOTOGRAPHY AND VISUAL LANGUAGE

How the Other Half Lives is first and foremost a work of photojournalism—one of the first examples of this new genre, which combined narrative with photographic illustrations and which, in the twentieth century, would become a key tool for documenting and addressing inequality. A relatively new medium at the time, photography gave readers striking physical evidence of a world of which many were unaware or unwilling to believe existed. But even in addition to the photographs accompanying the narrative (and today some versions of the book leave the photos out), the work is also characterized by a confidence in the power of the visual to expose hidden or unpleasant realities and to incite society toward change and reform.

While certain forms of photography had existed since the middle of the nineteenth century, consumer photography—rather than photography as a professional practice—was still new when Riis was reporting toward the end of the century. An amateur himself, he was nonetheless able to bring a camera with him into the neighborhoods he visited and document what he saw there. And while photography would eventually become accepted as an art form just like literature, many understood it as fully unbiased evidence. Even as the book uses literary modes like dramatic irony and suspense, then, photography allows Riis to claim a certain objectivity for his work, situating it in the realm of science more than art. *How*

the Other Half Lives would set an important paradigm for social reformers who could use this tool to reveal realities otherwise easy to pretend didn't exist.

The very language that Riis uses is highly visual in nature as well. The book is structured as a tour in which the author guides the reader through various neighborhoods: we are meant to imagine ducking into tenements and peering down certain alleyways. Riis sometimes addresses the reader directly as if they were present next to him, pointing out details—for instance, asking the reader to watch out for the children playing in the street, or to be careful amid the darkness of a saloon. Such techniques allow the narrator to serve an authoritative and explanatory function—the narrative equivalent of photography—but also to create a vivid, evocative portrayal of the setting Riis is exploring. By “showing” rather than “telling,” the book demonstrates the conviction that if readers could truly experience or visualize “how the other half lives,” they might be more willing to work toward reforming social inequalities.



THE PROGRESSIVE ERA AND IMMIGRATION

How the Other Half Lives is an important example of—and in many ways helped to spark—the

Progressive Era in American history, which is usually dated to the period between the 1890s and the 1920s. The Progressive Era was a period of diverse and wide-ranging social reforms prompted by sweeping changes in American life in the latter half of the nineteenth century, particularly industrialization, urbanization, and heightened rates of immigration. Rising levels of social and economic inequality also helped to galvanize a growing middle class of professionals—including Riis himself—into seeking change. Progressive reformers like Riis were convinced that vast problems like greed, poverty, health problems, and corruption could best be solved through good education, a safe environment, and reformed government: they sought change within the law but also promoted control and planning on the level of individual family life as well.

One way Riis and many others sought to expose social problems was through “muckraking,” a kind of journalism by which writers sought to uncover scandalous, detailed accounts of corruption—particularly in ways that would expose powerful people to public view. The moments in *How the Other Half Lives* of dramatic irony and explicit cries for sympathy are key elements of the muckraking style, which Riis and others found vital to promoting progress. The Tenement Act of 1901 was one direct result of Riis's Progressivist efforts: others turned trust-busting (that is, getting rid of powerful corporate monopolies) or the shocking conditions in factories and sweatshops to similar ends.

At the end of the nineteenth century, much of the most difficult

and backbreaking labor in the country was performed by immigrants. While the United States had always been a country of immigrants, certain historical trends in Europe at the time, from the Irish potato famine to Central European revolutions and persecutions, caused immigration to swell at an unprecedented rate. Riis, a Danish immigrant himself, struggled to find work for many years. But he and other Progressive reformers, while eager to improve the lot of recent immigrants, were also convinced that they could only do so by “Americanizing” them in the ways they found best. The liberal, open character of the Progressive Era was thus also defined by a certain authoritarian streak, one that can be found threaded throughout the pages of *How the Other Half Lives*—a sense that the poorest and most vulnerable need to be told how to act and live in a certain way if they want their lot to improve.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE POTTER'S FIELD

In chronicling the desperation of the city's poorest residents, Riis also draws attention to the ways this population attempts to maintain a sense of pride and dignity in the face of squalid conditions. One of these ways manifests itself in the desire to have a proper funeral for family members, even or especially if they die as a result of starvation or diseases directly related to poverty. While Riis spends time moralizing about the expense of such funerals for people who cannot afford them, he also recognizes the significance of such rituals—especially given the fact that the lack of a proper burial can be considered a profound dishonor. The common grave or Poor Burying Ground—also known in the book by the ancient characterization of the “potter's field”—inevitably awaits many of the tenement inhabitants whose lives Riis chronicles. After death, their bodies are dumped in a common grave without an individual tombstone or marker, a process that Riis describes as a fulfillment of the anonymity and lack of social care that defined these people's identities while they were alive. Death, rather than serving as a final resting place or freedom from life's difficulties, only confirms the inequalities and injustices embedded within late-nineteenth-century New York society.



BEER

One of the elements of tenement-house life that Riis examines is the high rate of saloons packing the neighborhoods home to the poorest residents of New York. Riis characterizes “stale-beer dives” and other alcohol shops as a natural outgrowth of poverty. A typical Progressive-era

reformer in this way, Riis assumes a moral connection between alcohol and moral depravity, even if he sees alcoholism as the result and not the cause of the unjust social and economic conditions of the poor. Drinking alcohol is, in his characterization, what the poor do because they are in need of some kind of solace for their situation. But stale-beer dives are also some of the only spaces of leisure open to this population. Places like reading rooms, cafés, and gardens, for instance, are absent from tenement neighborhoods: as a result, Riis argues, the saloons are both an emblem and a source of the worst things that can be found in the poorest areas of the city.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Martino Fine Books edition of *How the Other Half Lives* published in 2015.

Introduction Quotes

☞ 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, as long as it was able to hold them there and keep its own seat. There came a time when the discomfort and crowding below were so great, and the consequent upheavals so violent, that it was no longer an easy thing to do, and then the upper half fell to inquiring what was the matter.

Related Characters: Jacob Riis (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

Riis introduces his book with a quotation from the French Renaissance writer Rabelais, which he hopes will serve two functions: it allows him to suggest that the gap between rich and poor is age-old and not confined to one particular context, and it also helps him to justify his own account by showing how such a truism can be adapted to the historical situation of New York's tenements. Here, though, the lack of specific contextual clues gives this historical trajectory—from ignorance and thoughtlessness on the part of the “top half” to a realization that something is “the matter”—a universal bent. Throughout the book, Riis will trace what he sees as the frustrating ways in which the wealthy prey on, but also claim not to know about, the plight of the poor, but here he seems to suggest that such excuses

are almost inevitable.

How the Other Half Lives is meant in large part to prevent upper-middle-class readers from being able to beg such ignorance. Unfortunately, Riis acknowledges, the housing situation in New York is so dire that it's increasingly become difficult for them to do so. Even while showing such surprise to be disingenuous, he also understands this newfound interest on the part of the more privileged to be a unique opportunity—one that will allow him to expose economic deprivation as well as the complicity of the world's "top half" in these realities.

☛ Might not the conference have found in the warning of one Brooklyn builder, who has invested his capital on this plan and made it pay more than a money interest, a hint worth heeding: "How shall the love of God be understood by those who have been nurtured in sight only of the greed of man?"

Related Characters: Jacob Riis (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis



Riis is referring to a recent conference held by a number of Christian denominations concerned about how to convert tenement residents to Christianity, and make sure they become good and moral citizens. Riis embraces Christianity himself and agrees that it would be ideal for tenants (who are often foreign and/or of different faiths) to convert; but here he exposes the irony that many people, often ostensibly Christians themselves, have exploited the city's poorest residents—giving them a warped sense of what Christianity really is.

Later, Riis will cite another Brooklyn builder and name him as Mr. A.T. White, whose "model tenements" Riis considers as promising examples of what decent housing in New York might look like. It's probable though not absolutely certain that this is the same person: in any case, this builder also seems committed to improving New York housing through modestly profitable business enterprises. "Modestly" is the key term for Riis: while he considers business to be a necessary partner to philanthropy and legal reform, he also (like many later Progressive-era reformers) wants to caution against excessive profit, which he finds indelibly tied to greed and moral degradation.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☛ Where are the tenements of to-day? Say rather: where are they not?

Related Characters: Jacob Riis (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 14



Explanation and Analysis

How the Other Half Lives uses a combination of photographs, statistics, anecdotes, and highly visual depictions in order to vividly portray particular neighborhoods of New York—neighborhoods that Riis assumes remain largely unknown to his readers, even if Manhattan is small enough that they are geographically quite close. At the same time, he underlines here that such neighborhoods have only spread at increasing rates over the course of the past century. Formerly confined to the areas below Fourteenth Street, he argues, it is increasingly impossible to answer where they are not, because they can be found on the East Side, West Side, toward Harlem, and in other boroughs (though Riis will focus on Manhattan). The rhetorical nature of the question posed here is made clear by a number of historical factors: industrialization, for one, which has made many factory jobs open up in the city, as well as both foreign and domestic immigration arriving to work at such jobs—and, without low rents corresponding to such low wages, increased overcrowding in the tenements that house these immigrants. Even though Riis doesn't want to blame the residents themselves for the spread of tenements, since these are the only places they can afford, he does characterize such expansion as a kind of contagious disease, suggesting that any reform needs to be systemic and dedicated.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☛ In their place has come this queer conglomerate mass of heterogeneous elements, ever striving and working like whiskey and water in one glass, and with the like result: final union and a prevailing taint of whiskey.

Related Characters: Jacob Riis (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis



Riis has just asked where “Americans” can be found in tenement-house neighborhoods—by which he implicitly means white Christians without an accent, rather than any official or legal definition of an American citizen. Riis himself was a Danish immigrant, but as a good Progressivist he insisted that assimilation into mainstream American norms was the only means of success for immigrants. Here, he uses a carefully chosen simile in order to express his suspicion of the many different kinds of people to be found in New York’s poorest neighborhoods. Riis’s book pays close attention to the problem of alcoholism in these neighborhoods, so his reference to whiskey mixed with water is also meant to signal a shared problem of addiction among these “heterogeneous elements.”

Even though Riis will identify certain groups—African-Americans, Bohemians, women—as worthy of compassion rather than scorn, here he suggests that the very fact that different communities coexist and mix at all is “queer.” The language used in this citation, indeed, only underlines Riis’s critique of multiculturalism, that is, of the maintenance of different norms, cultural traditions, and languages, as confusing and strange. Throughout the book, Riis’s view of otherness will remain ambivalent, in different ways open- and close-minded to the persistence of cultural difference.

Indeed, the technique of using the first-person plural (the repetition of “we”) rather than singular (“I”) allows readers to picture themselves accompanying Riis into places they might never witness without him. Here, Riis presumes a specific reader—a New Yorker who would know how to take the Elevated Railroad, but also an upper-middle-class person who probably has never gotten off the line by Franklin Square. The reference to public transportation also helps to underline Riis’s point about the shocking ways in which wealth and destitution coexist in New York, quite close in physical, geographic terms, but far apart in terms of economic and social realities.

☛ Danger and trouble—of the imminent kind, not the everyday sort that excited neither interest nor commiseration—run even this common clay into heroic moulds on occasion; occasions that help us to remember that the gap that separates the man with the patched coat from his wealthy neighbor is, after all, perhaps but a tenement. Yet, what a gap! and of whose making?

Related Characters: Jacob Riis (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 31-32

Explanation and Analysis



Riis has just described an anecdote about a fire in one of the tenements of Madison Street Alley, during which a number of people living in nearby tenements had managed to rescue some of the residents. Here Riis wants to draw attention to the kinds of heroism that are largely ignored by the media and by New York’s wealthy residents, who often fail to know what’s happening elsewhere on the island of Manhattan that they share. He has and will continue to stress the “everyday” dangers that the poor face, but this is one opportunity to signal the ways in which more humdrum struggles can break out into tragedy, but also heroism.

This anecdote also allows Riis to make a case for the essential commonality of people across socioeconomic divides. His book strives to challenge the common assumption of the time that the poor were morally weak, corrupt, and deserving of their lot. While Riis acknowledges some of this to be true, he does so in order to argue that such behavior is the result of their poverty; here, in a more radical way, he suggests that even amidst difficult living conditions there is great heroism to be found. As a result, one can’t argue that the “wealthy neighbor” is also morally

Chapter 4 Quotes

☛ Leaving the Elevated Railroad where it dives under Brooklyn Bridge at Franklin Square, scarce a dozen steps will take us where we wish to go. With its rush and roar echoing yet in our ears, we have turned the corner from prosperity to poverty. We stand upon the domain of the tenement.

Related Characters: Jacob Riis (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 22


Explanation and Analysis

This quotation marks one of the first times that Riis moves from “telling” to “showing,” that is, from describing various features of New York’s tenement-house neighborhoods to inviting his readers to join him as he visits such places. Of course, this visit is an imagined and carefully constructed one—while Riis did spend a great deal of time in such neighborhoods, he drew on his own experiences but also on other information as well as on literary techniques in order to create an evocative, vivid atmosphere for his reader.

superior to the tenement resident. The rhetorical question with which Riis concludes this excerpt underlines his conviction that it's the wealthy who draw such lines and who keep the poor trapped in their tenements.

☝☝ Suppose we look into one? No.—Cherry Street. Be a little careful, please! The hall is dark and you might stumble over the children pitching pennies back there.

Related Characters: Jacob Riis (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Riis invites his readers to join him as he enters one of the tenements on Cherry Street, in the Seventh Ward. Once again, he moves from description and general characterization of the area, bolstered by anecdotes, personal experiences, and hard data, to vivid present-tense narration (which is, as before, carefully constructed to produce a certain effect in the reader). Here in particular, the literary technique of apostrophe, or address to the reader (here a direct command), makes the reader feel personally implicated in the narrative. This is especially the case given the dark, dingy spaces that Riis is describing. He doesn't want to allow his readers to simply consume *How the Other Half Lives* from the comfort of their own homes, ready to return to their privileged lives as soon as they close the book. Instead, he wants them to really imagine what it's like to live in one of these tenements in a multisensory way. Only if they succeed in picturing and imaginatively experiencing this other life, he thinks, will they be more likely to work to change these conditions themselves.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ What if I were to tell you that this alley, and more tenement property in “the Bend,” all of it notorious for years as the vilest and worst to be found anywhere, stood associated on the tax-books all through the long struggle to make its owners responsible, which has at last resulted in a qualified victory for the law, with the name of an honored family, one of the “oldest and best,” rich in possessions and in influence, and high in the councils of the city's government?

Related Characters: Jacob Riis (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

Once again, Riis uses apostrophe, or direct address to the reader, in order to include us in the narrative and increase the stakes of the story. Here, as Riis purports to guide his reader through the “Bend,” he also strikes a more conversational tone through the use of language like “What if...”. But the casual tone is immediately qualified by an anecdote that Riis expects and indeed hopes will be shocking—that the squalid apartments we're now observing are owned by one of the city's wealthiest families, a family that has denied all responsibility for the tenements' current conditions.


While part of Riis's purpose is to expose and detail exactly how the “other half” survives and to track everyday life in their own neighborhoods, he also wants to expose the underlying connections between rich and poor that, he thinks, too often remain invisible. This specific anecdote allows him to trace one connection, as evidenced by the tax books bearing the wealthy family's name. By not naming the family, Riis refrains from total humiliation but also encourages tantalizing guesswork and speculation by others as to who the guilty parties could be. Finally, the story underlines Riis's point that poverty, far from being a natural result of certain behavior and moral choices, is often directly caused by the greed and corruption of powerful people—people who may well go on to condemn the poor for their own moral weaknesses.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ The meanest thief is infinitely above the stale-beer level. Once upon that plane there is no escape. To sink below it is impossible; no one ever rose from it. One night spent in a stale-beer dive is like the traditional putting on of the uniform of the caste, the discarded rags of an old tramp.

Related Characters: Jacob Riis (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

These are harsh words that Riis uses to condemn the “stale-


beer dives” or unofficial, unlicensed, and often ephemeral gathering places for “tramps” to drink beer, places scattered throughout tenements that last until being broken up by the police. Riis’s contrast of the tramps that frequent these establishments with thieves is meant to highlight what he sees as a greater evil even than crime: idleness and refusal to work. Thieves, at least in his account, are often pushed into crime by desperation: even if they do something illegal, at least they’re attempting to feed themselves (and often their family) by acting. What bothers Riis about the stale-beer dives is the way they encourage and reinforce an unwillingness to work at all.

Like other Progressive reformers, Riis was suspicious of any kind of alcohol consumption, finding it inevitably linked to moral corruption and physical degeneration. Stale-beer dives, even more than saloons and other bars and drinking establishments in the city, are thus for him the lowest kind of social space, inviting people into a world of addiction and idleness from which they may never escape. And for Riis, the crowded, dark, unmonitored tenements are prime breeding grounds for such unwelcome drinking holes.

nineteenth-century cartoons, songs, and other elements of American popular culture. These cultural forms promoted a stereotypical and usually racist characterization of Chinese immigrants that emphasized their foreignness. Here, Riis plays on that familiarity, but also claims a privileged position of years-long observer, though only in order to confirm the prejudiced account of Chinese immigrants in which his ethnographic account will trade.

●● Granted, that the Chinese are in no sense a desirable element of the population, that they serve no useful purpose here, whatever 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 in, we must make the best of it.

Related Characters: Jacob Riis (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 76



Explanation and Analysis

As Riis concludes the chapter, he positions himself as compassionate and liberal-minded compared to his contemporaries. Many people at the time, indeed, believed that certain immigrant groups should be sent back to their country of residence and/or that further immigration should be limited or even banned. Riis doesn’t quite say that this is a bad idea. He agrees with his imaginary interlocutors that the Chinese are “undesirable” and “useless,” thus continuing to engage easily with the casual racism that has characterized much of this chapter about Chinatown. But his version of prejudice results in different policy aims to those of his contemporaries: rather than ban Chinese immigrants, he proposes making it more likely that they will assimilate into American society. Of course, he assumes that this assimilation needs to happen on the terms of white, Christian America: the existing customs and traditions that Chinese immigrants have brought to America have no place in his view. Compared to Riis’s forward-thinking and generous description of other groups in the tenements, his unquestioned prejudice against the Chinese is even more striking—though also a key motivation for his assimilationist goals.

Chapter 9 Quotes

●● At the risk of distressing some well-meaning, but, I fear, too trustful people, I state it in advance as my opinion, based on the steady observation of years, that all attempts to make an effective Christian of John Chinaman will remain abortive in this generation; of the next I have, if anything, less hope.

Related Characters: Jacob Riis (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis



This statement introduces Riis’s chapter in which he describes Chinatown, and inevitably colors how he hopes his reader will think about Chinese immigrants as well. For Riis, assimilation is what all immigrants to America should strive for—and this quotation underlines his assumption that one assimilates into American society by becoming a Christian. That he denies in advance all possibility of assimilation to the Chinese thus reflects both his narrow view of American culture and his suspicion of this entire national group, and of its place in New York.

Readers would have been familiar with the name “John Chinaman,” a caricature of a Chinese worker often used in

Chapter 10 Quotes

☞☞ As scholars, the children of the most ignorant Polish Jew keep fairly abreast of their more favored playmates, until it comes to mental arithmetic, when they leave them behind with a bound. It is surprising to see how strong the instinct of dollars and cents is in them. They can count, and correctly, almost before they can talk.

Related Characters: Jacob Riis (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis



This chapter details the tenement-house neighborhoods largely populated by Jews, often immigrants or descendants of immigrants, as Riis continues his systematic portrayal of different ethnic, national, or racial communities. Part of Riis's avowed goal in such portrayals is to invite his readers to understand and imagine the experiences of people very different from themselves, so that they might be more likely to want to act to improve the shocking living conditions of New York's poor. Yet while Riis argues that certain behaviors of the poor, including their questionable morality, are a result of their economic conditions and not vice versa, his often sweeping judgments about whole groups of people seem to work against such views. Here, for instance, he implies that certain behaviors of the children he observes are a result of their identity as Jews.

This argument relies on a pervasive stereotype, which Riis embraces, that Jewish people are greedy, miserly, and generally obsessed with money. Rather than examine the history of this community, as he does with the history of tenement houses, for instance, Riis is content to rely on ethnic prejudice as a sufficient explanatory mechanism—reflecting his ambivalent attitude toward difference and diversity.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☞☞ I state but the misgivings as to the result of some of the practical minds that have busied themselves with the problem. Its keynote evidently is the ignorance of the immigrants. They must be taught the language of the country they have chosen as their home, as the first and most necessary step.

Related Characters: Jacob Riis (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 99-100

Explanation and Analysis

As Riis concludes the chapters he's devoted to the Jewish neighborhoods, he asks how the condition of people working here, usually manufacturing cheap clothing, might be improved—though he is eager to stress that this must be done without promoting “pauperism” or charity without any conditions attached. For Riis, Jewish workers in New York are directly responsible for unsustainably low profit margins in clothing manufacturing (while he often wants to stress the corruption of powerful, invisible, and usually wealthy forces in these neighborhoods, he also argues at times that the source of many problems comes from the vulnerable populations themselves). As a result, he imagines the ideal solution to be their transition to other, more sustainable kinds of work.

But Riis is committed to a certain model of low-wage work, one that relies on the ideal of assimilation to an American way of life in which “American” implies white, English-speaking, and usually Christian. In some ways, Riis's statement that these immigrants must learn English is a pragmatic appeal, an attempt to imagine how more jobs might open up to them. But his Progressive-era mentality also ignored the possibility that there might be other definitions or ways of being “American” other than converting to a single norm.

☞☞ As we stop in front of a tenement to watch one of these groups, a dirty baby in a single brief garment—yet a sweet, human little baby despite its dirt and tatters—tumbles off the lowest step, rolls over once, clutches my leg with unconscious grip, and goes to sleep on the flagstone, its curly head pillowed on my boot.

Related Characters: Jacob Riis (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

Riis has just concluded his rhetorical argument about the need for Jewish assimilation to American society. But he's maintained the fiction that he's just paused to explain some background, while he—together with the reader—are still standing in a tenement neighborhood, preparing to return home. This image allows Riis to switch dramatically from straightforward rhetoric to evocative imagery. Strikingly,

Riis feels he needs to characterize the baby he sees as human “despite” the fact that it is dirty and shabby. The reminder reflects Riis’s goal throughout the book to expose the conditions of New York’s tenement neighborhoods to those who have never been there nor can imagine what they’re like. But by also stressing the “humanity” of the people living there—in part through this depiction of a sweet, small baby—he hopes to underline certain universals of human life, ways in which the families living in such places are ultimately not too different from the families of Riis’s readers.

Riis’s appeal to sympathetic engagement is developed further by involving himself in the observation: the baby seems to want, even unconsciously, to cling onto any human form that might give it the care it may well not find at home. Although the image might strike contemporary readers as mawkish and over-the-top, it is part of a long history of literary sentimentalism that uses sympathy and even tears to encourage social action.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☝☝ If, when the account is made up between the races, it shall be claimed that [the Negro] falls short of the result to be expected from twenty-five years of freedom, it may be well to turn to the other side of the ledger and see how much of the blame is borne by the prejudice and greed that have kept him from rising under a burden of responsibility to which he could hardly be equal.

Related Characters: Jacob Riis (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

Riis’s descriptions of the African-American communities in tenement neighborhoods are strikingly different from his verdict on Chinese and Jewish immigrant communities. While he had trafficked in stereotypes and prejudices regarding those groups, he criticizes the application of similar stereotypes to black people. And while many people in the late nineteenth century refused to hire or rent to black tenants, Riis denounces such policies as dangerous racial prejudice.


Here Riis refers to the fact that, at the time of his writing, the Civil War had ended barely twenty-five years earlier. Presumably, then, former slaves had nearly a generation in which to “catch up” to their white counterparts. Riis argues

that this assumption is wrongheaded, not quite because twenty-five years is hardly long compared to centuries of slavery, but rather because discrimination in the North has kept African-Americans in a marginalized position not too different from slavery. Here as elsewhere (though, as we’ve seen, not everywhere) in the book, Riis argues that housing and economic conditions cause poverty and immorality, not the other way around—and the “improvement” of the black population once it spread from the worst tenements to better housing is a key piece of evidence for his argument.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☝☝ The changing of Tompkins Square from a sand lot into a beautiful park put an end for good and all to the Bread and Blood Riots of which it used to be the scene, and transformed a nest of dangerous agitators into a harmless, beer-craving band of Anarchists. They have scarcely been heard of since. Opponents of the small parks system as a means of relieving the congested population of tenement districts, please take note.

Related Characters: Jacob Riis (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 123-124

Explanation and Analysis


Part of Riis’s commitment to tenement-housing reform lies in his conviction that the transformation of housing is not simply one aspect of a larger fight against poverty, but the key cause and root of economic and social deprivation. This belief, in turn, affects Riis’s assumption that aesthetic appearances too are central rather than peripheral to stability and well-being. Indeed, Riis often seems just as appalled at the lack of green spaces in tenement neighborhoods as at the starvation threatening its youngest residents—though in his view, this is because the former directly influences the latter.

Here, in the midst of a chapter that bleakly depicts the destitution and desperation of these areas, Riis introduces an anecdote about one small reform that’s already been introduced—the transformation of a sand lot into a park, a transformation that, according to Riis, actually drove out violence and pacified the area. Part of Riis’s commitment in sharing this anecdote is democratic: for him, parks and other beautiful, open spaces shouldn’t be limited to the rich but should be available to everyone. But his idea is simultaneously more radical than that—in that he is arguing

that green spaces actually create peace and stability—and less radical, in that planting seeds and building parks are more a matter of private initiative (though Riis also lobbied the government for the creation of public parks) than systemic social change. Still, one consequence of *How the Other Half Lives* was, indeed, the establishment of many such spaces—a concrete change to New York’s poorest neighborhoods.

☛ There is nothing in the prospect of a sharp, unceasing battle for the bare necessities of life, to encourage looking ahead, everything to discourage the effort. Improvidence and wastefulness are natural results.

Related Characters: Jacob Riis (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis


Riis has been chronicling the specific amounts that certain tenement-house families earn and spend in a week’s time, as well as weighing the argument that poor families are more likely to remain so because they spend everything they make and fail to save up. Riis prefers to express awe and surprise at how families manage simply to stay afloat at all. Here, though, he also acknowledges the possibility that the critics of the poor are partly correct—but for reasons that similarly deserve compassion. “Wastefulness,” like alcoholism or petty crime, is according to Riis the natural result of living hand-to-mouth: it’s not that wasteful people are more likely to be poor, but rather that the causal connection works the other way around. The major implication of this intervention is that anyone interested in improving the situation should be less concerned with reproving poor people for spending too much, than with helping them gain more stable living and working conditions so that they don’t need to live as precariously as before.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☛ One may walk many miles through the homes of the poor searching vainly for an open reading-room, a cheerful coffee-house, a decent club that is not a cloak for the traffic in rum. The dramshop yawns at every step, the poor man’s club, his forum and his haven of rest when weary and disgusted with the crowding, the quarreling, and the wretchedness at home.

Related Characters: Jacob Riis (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis


Riis contrasts the ubiquity of saloons and bars throughout New York’s tenement-house neighborhoods with the scarcity of any other means of socializing. Many Progressive-era reformers, committed to official education as the key to eradicating social ills, were also convinced that a vibrant public sphere would also serve the purposes of life-long education, supported by spaces including libraries, lecture halls, and social clubs. As is often the case, Riis seems just as appalled by the lack of such places in these neighborhoods as he is by what we might think of as more pressing issues, like sickness-breeding apartments or lack of funds to buy more than a daily meal. But Riis’s statements here reflect his belief that such leisure and social spaces, like parks, are not an extra benefit that the poor can’t afford—in fact, their existence would go a long way both toward giving people a “haven” to rest that’s not the workplace or the cramped, depressing home, but also toward bettering the neighborhoods themselves.

Instead, Riis characterizes the “dramshop” or tavern as the only place where people can socialize. Alcoholism, Riis thinks, is the inevitable result of overcrowded lodgings and lack of social space.

☛ A number of [saloons], on the contrary, had brought their owners wealth and prominence. From their bars these eminent citizens stepped proudly into the councils of the city and the State. The very floor of one of the bar-rooms, in a neighborhood that lately resounded with the cry for bread of starving workmen, is paved with silver dollars!

Related Characters: Jacob Riis (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

Once again, Riis is eager to point out the underlying connections between the rich and poor, even when the

wealthy purport to know nothing about the lives of New York's most vulnerable populations. Here the link stems from the fact that many of the saloons he's described are actually owned by wealthy families, who turn a profit off of getting poor people to drink more and more. (Other Progressive-era reformers would go further than Riis in their condemnation of alcoholism and even promote banning the sale of alcohol.) Riis writes metaphorically here in order to vivify such connections, which usually remain opaque and difficult to unravel: instead he constructs a direct passageway from the bar to the city council. Presumably, the bar paved with silver-dollars is a metaphorical image as well: the point here is to make clear the appalling irony that such wealth continues at the expense of literally starving people.

Chapter 20 Quotes

☝ But of the thousands, who are travelling the road they trod to the end, with the hot blood of youth in their veins, with the love of life and of the beautiful world to which not even sixty cents a day can shut their eyes—who is to blame if their feet find the paths of shame that are “always open to them”?

Related Characters: Jacob Riis (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Riis has turned a sympathetic eye to the plight of women in tenement neighborhoods, who are often paid even less than the men, and many of whom nonetheless have to support a family on their own. After describing one pair of working sisters whose lives deteriorated, rather than improved, over the decades since they immigrated to the United States, Riis contrasts these now elderly ladies to the many young women around them. Given that their youth and beauty are prized by a world that sees no other place for them, Riis asks us not to judge or condemn those women who choose prostitution in order to make a living for their families. Indeed, Riis assumes that it will be obvious to his readers what the “paths of shame” mean: prostitution was considered a major social ill and one of the reasons for the moral depravity of the poor. As with alcoholism, however, Riis wants to stress that prostitution is not the result but the cause of immorality, and the reasons for entering onto that path require sympathy rather than condemnation.

Chapter 21 Quotes

☝ Tenement-house reform holds the key to the problem of pauperism in the city. We can never get rid of either the tenement or the pauper. The two will always exist together in New York. But by reforming the one, we can do more towards exterminating the other than can be done by all other means together that have yet been invented, or ever will be.

Related Characters: Jacob Riis (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis


Although Riis has seemed before to imply that the situation he's exposing can be eradicated, here he expresses a greater measure of moderation or humility as he admits the limits of his project. In part, this is because Riis believes that, given the specific context of New York, it's impossible to ever entirely do away with tenements—and where tenements exist, paupers will fill them. But Riis emphasizes the close connection between housing conditions and social behaviors, one that he's stressed in various ways throughout the book. He also implies that historical efforts to combat pauperism have failed in large part because they haven't taken housing conditions into account, instead focusing on the pauper himself. Having acknowledged various other reforms that have been attempted in the city, with varying degrees of success, Riis inserts his own project into a longer trajectory while also stressing the unique advantages that his own proposals entail.

Chapter 22 Quotes

☝ There is often tragic interest in the struggles of the ensnared wretches to break away from the meshes spun about them. But the maelstrom has no bowels of mercy; and the would-be fugitives are flung back again and again into the devouring whirlpool of crime and poverty, until the end is reached on the dissecting-table, or in the Potter's Field.

Related Characters: Dr. Louis L. Seaman (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis



Riis has been detailing what he understands as an extension of the tenement-house system: the hospitals, insane asylums, and workhouses located on the islands around Manhattan (and thus similarly hidden from the sight of the wealthy) that largely house the poor. In an ideal world, according to Riis, institutions like these could serve a noble cause: they could provide relief from overcrowding on Manhattan, decent medical care for those who can't afford it, and spaces of education and reform for the young, preventing them from entering a life of crime on the streets. But instead, these places are little more than holding-pens for people until they're returned to the tenements they came from, in no better or even worse a condition than before.

Here Riis quotes a former chief of staff of the hospitals on Blackwell's Island, from an 1886 address he gave to the American Association for the Advancement of Science (one of many anecdotes Riis quotes from others, though this one is particularly lengthy and recalls Riis's own vivid language). Seaman compares the seemingly inevitable cycle between asylum and tenement to a "maelstrom" or whirlpool, from which the poor cannot break out—especially when, in large part due to their situation, they descend into madness. In Seaman's account, once this process begins it can't be stopped; instead, he argues, the cycle must be prevented from starting at all.

Chapter 23 Quotes

☛☛ The man was arrested, of course, and locked up. To-day he is probably in a mad-house, forgotten. And the carriages roll by to and from the big stores with their gay throng of shoppers. The world forgets easily, too easily, what it does not like to remember.

Related Characters: Jacob Riis (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis

Riis has just related an anecdote about a man who was arrested recently after springing into a crowd on 5th Avenue—a group of wealthy shoppers standing in acute contrast to his own hungry family and crying children—and slashing around him with a knife. Riis presumably heard about this tale in a newspaper, where it would have held the attention of readers for a morning, before the next piece of news caught their eye. Riis uses this anecdote to underline what he sees as the moral travesty of forgetfulness and

unconcern on the part of New York's most privileged for those who most need its help. In writing his book, Riis has wanted to do what he can to prevent the world from ignoring "what it does not like to remember," in part by joining the techniques of reporting to those of photography and statistical analysis. By vividly juxtaposing the forgotten man in a mad-house with the "gay carriages" rolling along the expensive department stores of 5th Avenue, Riis attempts to expose the moral hypocrisy of those who claim ignorance about the lives of the poor, though not simply to denounce the wealthy, but rather to encourage them to change their ways and act on behalf of others.

Chapter 25 Quotes

☛☛ The sea of a mighty population, held in galling fetters, heaves uneasily in the tenement. [...]

I know of but one bridge that will carry us over safe, a bridge founded upon justice and built of human hearts.

Related Characters: Jacob Riis (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 226

Explanation and Analysis

The final, closing image of *How the Other Half Lives* is ostensibly drawn from a visit that Riis paid to a beach accessible from New York—though, he implies, not truly accessible for most of the tenant residents whose lives he's explored. It's summertime and the sea is calm, but he's heard that in winter it grows stormy and can even burst over the bluff holding it back. Here Riis compares that winter's sea to the many New Yorkers "fettered" in squalid living conditions (residents whom he's already characterized as "crowds" or "swarms," similarly anonymous and ominous). The tenements, like the bluff, he suggests, are only so strong.

This image implies that the eventual uprising of New York's poor as a result of their destitution is inevitable. But Riis employs this final simile as a warning rather than an absolute prophecy—that is, this future might be able to be averted, if only his readers and others join together and enact some of the solutions he's proposed. Here Riis employs another metaphor, that of a bridge built of justice and compassion—a human construction made to protect against natural dangers. It's fitting that Riis, who has remained confident that the key to reducing poverty and increasing security lies in housing reform, ends with an

image of another manmade structure whose simplicity

belies just how vital it is.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

EPIGRAPH/PREFACE

The book begins with an excerpt from a religious poem entitled “A Parable” by James Russell Lowell, which contrasts the pomp and splendor of the rulers and kings that hosted Jesus with the poverty of those whom Jesus preferred.

The use of this poem as epigraph signals the author’s commitment to joining Christian morality with a social and economic understanding of poverty.



Jacob Riis’s preface describes his belief that there is something to be learned from anyone’s experience, even a lowly newspaper man like himself. He also thanks friends and colleagues who have helped him in his writing.

Riis’s appeal to the value of “anyone’s” experience prefigures his insistence on paying close attention to the lives of those often ignored by the more privileged.



INTRODUCTION

Riis quotes a French Renaissance writer Rabelais who once said that one half of the world doesn’t know how the other half lives. Riis adds that this is because the top half has never cared about those below it, until recently—when the discomfort and despair of the most vulnerable have finally made the privileged wonder about them.

The “other half” will become Riis’s guiding description for the tenement residents whose lives he explores. His rebuke to the top half of society is also a rebuke to his readers, whom he wants to instruct but also critique for their lack of care.



Only gradually, Riis says, did New York attain a similar level of crowding to other cities. The boundary line between one half of the population and the other, in New York, depends on who lives in the tenements. Today three-quarters of New York’s population lives in them, and even more are arriving. Riis calls the tenement system one of public neglect and private greed, a system that creates evil, spreads epidemics, and leads to pauperism and crime.

Riis gives some historical background that will better allow us to understand the contemporary tenements, as well as the relationship between housing and immigration (both foreign and internal, from the countryside to the city). Here he makes an early claim for the relationship between housing and poverty.



Riis argues that while some have said that these problems are due to the drunkenness of the poor, for instance, he wants to emphasize other data: that certain social conditions lead to immoral behaviors, and that the destitution of the poor often continues to the benefit of tenement owners. The only way to counter this issue, he argues, is to stop the process of speculation and profit that is exploiting the tenements’ inhabitants. He agrees with a Brooklyn builder who has asked how Christian feeling can possibly be encouraged in those who have witnessed only greed.

Riis never denies that certain behaviors considered immoral or depraved by his Progressive-Era peers are more common among the poor. But he wants to dig deeper than surface-level observations, uncovering the causes that have led to such behaviors—meaning that the blame ultimately lies in the greed of the most powerful, who set a standard for the behavior of the poor.



CHAPTER 1

Riis begins a short history of tenements by tracing them back to early Manhattan, when they actually housed the city's wealthiest residents. After the war of 1812, immigration increased the urban population fivefold, and the rich moved out of town. Their homes were bought by real-estate agents and boarding-house keepers, who partitioned the buildings into many cramped, often windowless rooms. The owners then fixed rents at a high rate for what was being offered, as—and here Riis quotes a report to the 1857 Legislature—the “privation,” “ignorance,” and “slovenliness” of the new, poor residents caused the condition of the homes to degenerate rapidly.

Soon, new tenements were built on the site of old yards and gardens, with ten families packed into each apartment. The rise of the middleman, who rented full blocks of tenements to sublet them, inflated prices even more, while the middlemen turned a blind eye to rampant disease and overcrowding. Today, Riis says, the East Side of Manhattan is still the most densely populated district in the world. Children began to die of suffocation from unventilated apartments. Still, rents remained 25-30 percent higher in the worst slums than elsewhere in the city.

Riis argues that the situation has hardly improved since the 1857 report. He's heard one story about a fire in a Mott Street home, giving ten families no place to go. Its owner had made \$600 a year on rent for a home fully insured at \$800, and lamented the loss of so valuable a property. A few other anecdotes confirm Riis's argument about the contrast between exorbitant rents and pitiable housing conditions.

Over the past few decades, such tenements spread from the old wealthy neighborhoods east, west, and north, sometimes packing up to forty families in one building. Riis quotes a report from the Society for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor describing the buildings in disrepair, outhouses and stables converted into homes, and the spread of vagrancy and juvenile crime throughout these neighborhoods. Though New York had a society for the promotion of education in Africa, there was not yet a Children's Aid Society or comparable philanthropic organization for New York itself.

In this account, over the course of the nineteenth century vast changes in the makeup of America's cities, due in large part to immigration, led directly to the rise of unsafe, squalid tenements. The irony that Riis explores here is that such tenements actually used to be home to New York's most privileged residents, making it even more tragic that their conditions have deteriorated without the wealthy even paying attention.



Riis explores the economics of tenement housing: aided by tables, graphs, and statistics, he argues that certain practices like those of the middleman made tenement housing become a center of corruption rather than a legitimate business operation. Riis is particularly interested in the injustice of squalid living conditions combined with skyrocketing rents.



While Riis often enters the neighborhoods of which he speaks himself, he also relies on official reports and anecdotes of others in order to create a comprehensive picture of the slum neighborhoods. This anecdote gives Riis further evidence revealing corruption.



Riis traces the spread of tenements across Manhattan as immigration continued to increase and little decent space was found to occupy this new population. The Society for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor is one of the philanthropic organizations in which Riis places some hope, even as he argues that New York philanthropy is too often directed abroad rather than to its own neighborhoods.



CHAPTER 2

Riis claims that it was the fear of cholera, which recurred several times throughout the nineteenth century, that began to spur people to action. The “Tenement-House Act” of 1867, which ordered the installation of windows in thousands of rooms for ventilation, was met with opposition from many owners who were loath to pay anything for repairs (though also from some tenants who objected to what they saw as the infringement of individual rights).

Reports began to chronicle young criminals in the city’s slums, brought up in overcrowded, unsanitary homes—even after the initial attempts at improvement had been made. Riis quotes several authorities that concluded that new tenements were continuing to spring up, as badly planned as older ones. Nothing, he says, has done more than offer temporary relief to the chronic overcrowding and squalor.

Riis transitions to defining a tenement, first legally, as a house occupied by three or more families, or two or more living on the same floor. But since that includes other kinds of apartments, he also quotes another description: a tenement is usually 4-6 stories high, often with a store that sells liquor on the first floor; four families are on each floor, with a dark windowless staircase at the center of the house.

The poor pay a third more rent downtown than they would for a flat in Harlem, since they must live close to where they work. Sometimes reports emerge of 70-80 children living in a single tenement. Usually water doesn’t reach higher than the second floor because of shoddy plumbing, though **beer** can easily quench thirst during rooftop picnics in the summer, Riis says.

Asking rhetorically where tenements are *not* to be found, Riis describes their spread from the Fourth Ward slums to the Annexed District, crowding all the lower wards of the city. Riis argues that today’s tenements, holding three quarters of New York’s population, *are* New York: but any characterization of them as a home is a “bitter mockery.”

Several cholera epidemics swept New York throughout the nineteenth century, worsened by unsanitary living conditions and overcrowding. Here Riis signals a key obstacle to reform, one that he’ll return to often: the unwillingness of owners to invest any more than they are forced to in the upkeep of the tenements.



By narrating this history in a certain way, Riis emphasizes the causal connection between crowding and crime: it’s not that people in tenements are naturally morally inferior to others, but rather that the uncleanness and overpopulation create the ideal conditions for crime.



Part of Riis’s effort toward making his work an objective, even scientific argument involves defining his terms; here, though, he supplements the legal definition of a tenement with an evocative description of what it’s actually like to live there.



Riis continues his vivid description of a typical tenement: rather than moving systematically from one aspect to another, he uses literary techniques like juxtaposition to contrast the stagnation of water with the ready flow of beer in order to characterize these homes.



While Riis argues that in fact tenements are housing for most of New York’s residents, he makes a distinction between a house and a home, insisting that tenements cannot possibly be the source of the kind of domestic stability he imagines being inherent to the idea of home.



CHAPTER 3

Riis describes lower New York as cosmopolitan, and touches on the many nationalities that can be found there, from Italians to Russians to Chinese immigrants. But there is no American community, he says. He once asked one elderly slum inhabitant where all the Americans went, and the man said he didn't know: they're certainly not here. Instead, Riis says, they are a strange mass of different elements, united mostly by the smell of whisky.

Riis describes how the Irish, once discriminated against, are now triumphant in the tenements, often becoming landlords themselves and exploiting Italians and other communities. Riis acknowledges that not all those living in the tenements are verging on beggarity: those who earn wages often have nowhere else they can afford to live. There is some upward mobility in these areas—second-generation Irishmen become bricklayers, the Chinese begin to own laundry businesses—but the slums continue to grow as well.

Riis says that a color-coded map of lower New York based on national origin would have more colors than a rainbow, though split into two great halves, one for the Irish in the West and one for Germans on the East Side. But woven throughout would be strips of neighborhoods housing Italians in the West, pushing up against the black population north from Thompson Street. Riis describes these colors and populations as “tides” and “waves” moving throughout the city.

Riis describes how Russian and Polish Jews are filling the Seventh Ward tenements on the river, jostling for space with Italians (red on Riis's hypothetical map, with “dull gray” for the Jews). In between is the “yellow” of Chinatown and the “dirty stain” of the Arab population, as well as the smaller pockets of Finnish sailors, the Greeks, and the Swiss. Riis claims that the Germans are the most successful at making a home out of their lodgings, without letting drunkenness or vagrancy corrupt them.

CHAPTER 4

Riis invites his readers to visit with him the Other Half of New York at home, telling readers there's nothing to fear. They won't excite interest, unless they're suspected of being a truant officer.

Many of the people of different ethnic backgrounds that Riis studies are indeed American citizens: here, he seems to mean by “Americans” white Christians whose families have been in the U.S. for more than a generation. The description of their affinity for whisky underlines Riis's suspicion of New York's diversity.



Riis tracks a certain level of upward mobility among immigrants, though here he critiques that trend as supporting the worst of the tenement system. That is, those who become wealthier, he says, often do so by exploiting the newest crop of immigrants, who are trapped there because of the lack of affordable housing in the city.



For much of this chapter, Riis's metaphor of the rainbow will structure how he moves from one ethnic neighborhood to the next. The metaphor is meant to show both the great diversity of tenement areas as well as the ways in which people of the same background tend to live and work together.



As Riis continues color-coding Lower Manhattan by ethnic group, he begins to trade in ethnic stereotypes and prejudices: “yellow” was a pejorative word for Chinese people, for instance, while “dull gray” and “dirty stain” reflect a bigoted characterization of certain other ethnic groups and nationalities.



After an initial sketch of the landscape, Riis now takes on the role of a tour guide who will show rather than simply tell readers his tale.



Riis describes leaving the Elevated Railroad under the Brooklyn Bridge, glancing at the old Knickerbocker homes on Cherry Street (the word refers to early Dutch settlers in New York), now surrounded by ugly, run-down buildings, and dilapidated themselves. Now their arched gateways lead to dark alleys where dirty children are playing around a dripping hydrant, cars whizzing by on the highway overhead.

Riis explains that this alley, Blind Man's Alley, until recently was home to a number of blind beggars who were tenants of a landlord, "Old Dan" Murphy. Before he went blind himself in old age, he grew rich off this population and refused to repair or clean up his buildings until forced to argue his case before the Board of Health.

Riis recounts having once taken a flash picture of a group of blind beggars here: the flash sparked a fire among the paper and rags hanging on the wall. He smothered the fire himself, then told a policeman, who found the story a great joke: it was the dirt that smothered the fire, he said. Once a year, though, the gloom lifts, as the city disperses the twenty thousand dollars allotted to the poor blind and Blind Man's Alley holds a party with singing and dancing.

Nearby is Gotham Court, where the mortality rate rose to 195 in 1000 inhabitants during the last cholera epidemic, an unprecedented rate. Irish and Italians live on this block, which was originally built in 1851 as a model tenement by a Quaker philanthropist. By its second decade, however, rates of sickness were swelling. Finally, the police drove out the entire population in order to prevent criminals ("Swamp Angels") from hiding in the sewers and cellars.

Riis points out one tenement in this alley that was a later addition to the court, formerly the property of the brother of Gotham Court's builder. A family feud prompted the man to build the tenement directly behind his brother's buildings, shutting out light and air—and it remained vacant for years.

Nearby a saloon bears the name "The Rock of Ages," blocking the entrance to yet another alley. In Cherry Street, according to Superintendent Murray, the police have uncovered more criminals than the rest of New York's wards together. Riis invites his reader to stroll from one street to the next and notice the contrast between the old, low houses in front and the tall tenements in back. Riis notes how important sunlight is for people's health, but argues that an employer cares less about laborers loading and unloading carts than about the horse pulling the carts.

Riis asks his readers to imagine accompanying him from their more comfortable homes to the dark alleys of Lower Manhattan, accessing them through public transportation and then reaching a new world, where once-wealthy neighborhoods have deteriorated.



While Riis is often eager to expose the corruption of far-away landlords and owners, he also spends time showing how people are exploited by others much closer to them in class and geography: "Old Dan" is both victim and abuser.



Flash photography, a relatively new technology when Riis was using it, allowed him to record realities hitherto ignored by the more privileged. But this anecdote also exposes the gap between Riis's own mobility and privilege and the desperation of the beggars' apartment he was recording.



Riis depicts Gotham Court in a visually precise way, but he's also interested in the longer history that has led to its current condition. Riis examines the ways in which former attempts at housing reform have often failed: one of his questions will include how to prevent such failure from happening again.



One element of tenements that Riis finds particularly appalling is the lack of light and air. Here, he shows how greed and pettiness on the part of owners can have a direct negative impact on residents.



Again, Riis draws on the anecdotes and experience of others familiar with these areas, including the police, in gathering evidence for his arguments. He then places such quantitative evidence (here the prevalence of crime on Cherry Street) in the background, asking his readers to see this area with him on an experiential basis, but also equipped with more objective knowledge.



Riis recounts how ten women and children died from a fire in one of the Madison Street tenements (he points to that street): the fire escapes had been inaccessible. A few neighbors had acted heroically in saving people's lives, and Riis asks us to remember such everyday, oft-forgotten heroism.

Part of Riis's commitment to the showing how the "other half" lives involves asking us to consider and care about the actions of those whom society often ignores, here even when those actions are heroic.



Riis invites us across the boundary of the Seventh Ward, past Penitentiary Row, a block of Cherry Street tenements. These have recently been filled by Jews, all peddlers and tailors who silently bear insults about their eagerness to buy up real estate. Riis points to a pleasure party passing by on an ash-cart, stopping in front of an old building called "the Ship," though no one knows why it bears that name.

Riis pays careful attention to the ethnic makeup of each neighborhood and housing block, here relying on a common stereotype that accused Jews of being greedy and miserly. He also takes on the role of the tourist guide, simply asking his readers to observe and notice alongside him.



Riis suggests we stop inside one of the ubiquitous saloons adjoining the tenements. He asks his readers to be careful in the dark hall lest they stumble over children playing. He passes by a set of sinks, shared by all the residents, and listens to a hacking cough on the other side of a wall. Before the end of the day the coughing child, sick with measles, will be dead. The mother tells Riis about it, as her husband says bitterly that they shouldn't complain if they couldn't afford to keep the baby anyway.

Riis's visual language works to create a conceit of immersive experience on the part of the reader, who can imagine navigating through the dark hall of the tenement while led by a confident guide who knows what to look for. Again, the ability of Riis to move in and out of such spaces is contrasted with the desperation of this family.



Riis asks us to step over a child huddled by the fire escape and outside, past the gap between brick walls (the "yard") and into the rear tenement, which is even darker and smaller. He points out one room that's neater than others, with a woman at the wash-tub who apologizes for the state of the place. The smell of hot soapsuds mingles with that of boiling cabbage and rags. Every day is wash day here, since the residents own so few clothes.

Riis's warnings to the imagined reader accompanying him are also meant to underline the acute levels of deprivation suffered by families here, from children who seem to be on their own to hard-working women constantly toiling just so that their families can have clean clothes to wear.



Riis wonders how these people might answer the question "Is life worth living?", were they to be asked. He recounts a few examples of especially desperate lodging situations, including a case in which the mother tried to kill herself from jumping out the window. Riis's "optimistic friend" argues that philosophy finds a natural place in the tenements, where people don't take death as hard.

Riis ironically refers to a question that a wealthy philosophical society in New York might discuss over a lavish meal. His anecdote of suicide is meant as a dramatic rebuttal to his friend's upbeat argument about stoic philosophical attitudes in the tenements.



CHAPTER 5

Riis describes the Italian population in New York tenements as stubbornly reproducing conditions of “destitution and disorder” from one generation to the next. Italian-Americans coax their countrymen into buying a ticket to the U.S. with promises of high wages, but once they arrive they are lost. Usually these immigrants are uneducated, and they put their trust in middlemen who make them pay at every turn.

Riis describes how the “padrone” or Italian boss has gained a monopoly over the industry of rag-picking by attaining a contract from the city for this work, so that anyone who wants to participate has to go through him. Rival factions, representing different contractors and padrones, fight over the dumps where this work takes place.

Italians, in this depiction, are mostly hard-working, but on Sundays they gamble and let their passions run wild: the games often turn violent. Still, the Italian men are also honest, the women are devoted wives and mothers, and the Italian personality is light-hearted and cheerful. These people’s main fault is their tendency to drink, Riis says, as saloon owners make a profit off their misery.

Here Riis turns to one specific national community, studying its customs and conditions. Again, he emphasizes the ways in which people’s countrymen can themselves be the source of corruption (even though his work also reflects how true causes of corruption are absent from direct sight).



Riis is particularly interested in the role of the padrone as a kind of middleman, who adds to the exploitation of some of the most vulnerable elements of New York’s population, even for a job like rag-picking that is hardly lucrative.



Riis is unconcerned about making sweeping judgments that characterize an entire ethnic group as behaving in a certain way. Even if these descriptions are not always negative, they work to deny the individuality of specific members of the population, and reinforce popular stereotypes.



CHAPTER 6

Riis describes the “Bend,” located in Mulberry Street where cows once grazed at pasture and now rag-pickers graze for trash. The tenements here are particularly unsafe, and are now packed with tramps crowding a maze of narrow passages. One can gain a view of this area from the corner of Bayard Street, the high road to “Jewtown” where one can hear what Riis calls the “queer lingo” of Hebrew. Around the corner is a street where Italians crowd the sidewalks, carrying on all their work outside when the sun shines (whereas Jews, he says, prefer to stay indoors).

Bandit’s Roost is one well-known set of shops, including a tobacco barrel, a fish-stand full of strange, foreign-looking creatures, and a butcher with unappetizing sausages. The women bustle through the streets carrying firewood and vegetables, while the men loiter. One pretty girl with amber beads in her hair is bargaining earnestly with an old woman over faded yarn. The Italian language sounds far more pleasant to Riis than the Hebrew around the corner.

Riis’s description of ragpickers “grazing” for trash is meant to signal a longer history of urbanization, of the country’s transformation into the city; but it also allows him to emphasize the dehumanizing aspect of ragpicking by comparing it to the grazing of cows. Now Riis turns to another ethnic group for which he will reserve particular suspicion and prejudice.



Riis finds the customs and lifestyles in the Jewish neighborhood highly foreign, and thus off-putting. While he sometimes seems genuinely interested in different cultures, here he is eager to dismiss everything he sees as negative and suspect, its distinctiveness a source of scorn more than curiosity.



In the street itself, there's a bit of an effort to keep things clean; but inside one of the "Bend" tenements, a small child was recently discovered covered with sores, dried blood streaking her hair. One year 155 children died in this block alone—infant mortality being a decent sign of sanitary conditions. The general death rate for 1888 there was 35.75 (compared to 26.27 for the entire city). In contrast, in a model tenement across the way, only two children's deaths were recorded. That tenement's agent will tell you that Italians are good tenants, while in the Bend the owner will say that they're the worst. Riis reveals that much of the "Bend" is owned by one of the most well-known, privileged families in New York, which spent years fighting against paying to improve the tenements.

Around the corner is Bottle Alley, where in one tenement Riis counts five, then six people sleeping in a single cramped bedroom. There are also five children. Riis quotes one of them saying that rent is "nine and a half," and that the landlord won't repair the peeling wallpaper. Riis remembers a health inspector's visit to one of these tenements in July, where a dying baby's temperature was 115, dying for lack of fresh air in a city full of charities.

Six blocks up Mulberry Street, Riis points out a ragpicker's settlement, packing forty families in two houses meant to hold five. The sanitary officer, he says, has cut down the standard of required breathing space from six to four hundred cubic feet, and turns a blind eye at even the cases when this requirement is unfulfilled. But the families do have to fear calls by other health officers, who might open the door to a dozen men and women sleeping on bunks or on the floor. After they scatter, though, and the officer or policeman leaves, the situation resumes as usual.

CHAPTER 7

Riis describes a midnight raid on one of the **stale-beer dives** in the Bend. Riis accompanies the sergeant into one tenement, where they stumble over tramps in the hallway until reaching a dark room in the back. Men and women are grouped around a beer keg over a filthy floor, with a wrinkled old "hag" dispensing out the beer into tomato cans.

The fact that several tenements in the same neighborhood can hold populations with such strikingly different conditions might seem to challenge the causal connection Riis draws between environment and poverty. But what he's trying to show here is how the state of the building itself—either improved or neglected by the powerful and often absent owners—can be decisive, and that this state has little to do with the ethnic makeup of the inhabitants (even though Riis himself certainly isn't immune from essentializing about ethnic groups).



As a reader today, it's sometimes difficult to feel the full force when Riis cites monthly rents like this one: he expects that a reader of the time would be shocked at the high amount. The stories of babies and children are particularly meant to tug at the heartstrings of upper- and middle-class readers.



Ragpickers were a much more common occupation for the poor in the nineteenth century, though precarious and often transitory. Here Riis documents the erratic relationship between the authorities and tenement residents: officers are alternately strict and careless, though ultimately the attempts of an individual policeman to reduce overcrowding prove futile.



Riis moves between describing excursions into the tenements as a photographer or as a police reporter. Here, it's the latter, as he may have more sympathy for the residents, but finds himself protected and guided by the authorities.



The sergeant knocks a can out of the woman's hand with his club, and some people sprint for the door, meeting the policemen outside. After they're caught, the sergeant counts thirteen in all, pronouncing that they'll be sent to the "island" for six months. Seventy-five tramps are then arrested in the four small rooms beyond the **beer** cellar, including a woman with a new-born baby on a heap of dirty straw. Back at the station, 275 tramps are crammed into cells to await conviction on the charge of vagrancy.

The **stale-beer dive** is known in the Bend as the "two-cent restaurant," home to home-brewed and unlicensed beer. It's run by an Italian, a black man, or sometimes a woman, its customers professional tramps. Some Italian dive-keepers have climbed the economic ladder as a result of keeping these places. In the summer, the hallways in tenements to these places are lined with "sitters"—tramps who have been unable to earn enough that day to enter the stale-beer dive. They squat overnight or until the police arrive.

In the winter, barkeepers in saloons sometimes allow these "sitters" to huddle around the stove, though they must stay awake or risk losing sympathy: if they fall asleep they're kicked out. Once Riis asked one tramp, smoking his pipe with evident contentment around a set of miserable ragpickers, if he could take a picture: he said he'd pay the man ten cents, but then the tramp took his pipe out of his mouth and demanded a quarter for that to be included in the picture. He'd barely lasted ten seconds at "honest labor" before striking.

Riis argues that once a tramp begins his career, laziness keeps him to it: he begins to be certain that the world owes him a living. Step by step, he loses his stability, until reaching bottom in the "Bend." After being brought, inevitably, to the police station, he might return to honest work, but might also return to the **beer** dives, as one sergeant tells Riis.

CHAPTER 8

Riis argues that the cheap lodging-houses lining Chatham Street and the Bowery also feed the "tramps' army." These are home to idleness and its corollary, crime, because they invite a transitory population of young men, having come in search of crowds and "life" without any interest in settling down. There are some respectable clerks and mechanics who can't afford anything better, but thieves also live here, on the lookout for recruits. Inspector Byrnes tells Riis that 400 young men in the past few years have been arrested for petty crimes originating here.

Riis describes the raid on the stale-beer dive as intense and dramatic, while also implying that the solution to alcoholism is not to be found by the violent swing of a policeman's club and the mass arrest on vagrancy charges of people crammed into the tenements. Part of what Riis is tracking is the regular vicious circle of tenement to prison and back.



Riis emphasizes the identity of the dive owner as something unusual, suggesting that the lack of "American" white male bartenders is already a sign that these places are unsavory and illegitimate. He also pays some attention to these dives as de facto lodging for people without a stable place to stay for a night, the "squatters" and "tramps."



While Riis seems in some ways sympathetic to the plight of "tramps" who lack even the most basic stability of a roof over their heads and a room to sleep in, he also scorns what he sees as their laziness and manipulative ways of making a few pennies. Vagrants thus lie largely outside Riis's framework of the complex causal factors at play in poverty.



Indeed, Riis does characterize the source of the tramps' instability as laziness: in prizing housing security above all, Riis also is suspicious of those who seem not even to want to achieve some measure of housing stability.



As Riis moves on to a new neighborhood, the tenements around the Bowery, he continues to develop the connection between idleness and crime. Here, he argues that the lack of stable housing directly fosters a population of thieves and vagrants, and even encourages young men from outside New York to migrate into the city, where they end up as petty thieves.



Riis quotes the report from the Society for the Prevention of the Cruelty to Children about the story of David Smith, the “New York Fagin,” who offered a 14-year-old boy named Edward Mulhearn (a runaway from home) a place to stay. Smith instructed Mulhearn in the art of pickpocketing; finally, he burned the boy’s arms with a hot iron so that he’d gain sympathy as a beggar, supposedly one who had been injured at the ironworks. Finally the boy’s father found Smith and his friends in his den, enjoying the proceeds of Mulhearn’s begging.

Riis cites [Oliver Twist](#) by Charles Dickens (a major influence on his own writing), a novel whose villain, Fagin, makes a profit out of sending young children off to beg and steal for him. The sensational tale that Riis relates here seems, indeed, lifted out of a novel: his point is that the youngest and most vulnerable are easily exploited by the comparatively more powerful.



These lodging-houses include 15-cent, 10-cent, and 7-cent beds, hardly worthy of the name. One wealthy and respectable New York resident runs several such establishments and is known to make \$8,000 a year profit, paying for his stylish house in Murray Hill. At other unlicensed houses, one can sleep on the floor for five cents or squat in a hallway for three cents. In total, he says, over five million people lacked stable housing last year—an increase of several hundred thousand over the previous year.

Riis tracks the specific economies of these lodging-houses, emphasizing the irony of the gap between the lavish Murray Hill home of one owner and the squalid conditions of the housing on which that wealth is built. The scarcity of decent, stable housing in New York is, for Riis, at the center of the economic and moral disasters he portrays.



Along the Bowery are located nearly one fifth of the city’s pawn shops and one sixth of its saloons. During presidential elections, according to Inspector Byrnes, political bosses enter these lodging-houses to win votes by bribery and fraud.

Inspector Byrnes’ name recurs several times in the book, as a key source of information about New York’s poor (though Riis also at times criticizes the police).



Recently a stove manufacturer attempted a charity experiment, opening a breakfast shop for the unemployed that offered coffee and a roll for free. After two weeks 2,014 people were counted in line. On that day the shop was closed, the experiment ended.

This short-lived “experiment” illustrates the extent of the need in these neighborhoods, a need that ultimately exceeded the capacity for a single individual.



CHAPTER 9

Riis moves on to describing Chinatown, and argues from the start that any attempts to make an “effective Christian” out of the Chinese are doomed to failure as a result of generations of “senseless idolatry.” A Chinese man would only convert, Riis thinks, for some ulterior motive, like gaining a Christian wife.

As a typical Progressive, Riis is suspicious of any group that retains its own traditions rather than assimilating to what he sees as true “American” norms—here, that includes Christianity.



Chinatown is next to the Bend, and its dreariness is everyday, not spectacular like its neighbor. The red and yellow holiday colors create a dull rather than bright atmosphere, “glowering” at a visitor from the telegraph pole that serves as the official newspaper of the neighborhood. The place feels secret, like all the important affairs are happening behind closed doors—not because crime is happening, Riis says, but because the Chinese are naturally secretive and untrustworthy.

This section underlines just how much of Riis’s “objective,” highly visual narrative is inevitably colored by his own beliefs and biases—here, making even the primary colors of yellow and red into dull or ominous signs of secrecy. For Riis, these colors are indicative of the “natural” Chinese temperament.



While the Chinese smoke opium like Caucasians smoke tobacco, Riis says, the danger is for the white people who are gripped by this drug. Chinese women are rarely seen: instead it's "white slaves" addicted to opium who crowd these tenements. These white women now only worship the pipe, and will never return home to their own people.

These tenements are striking for their cleanliness: Riis says it makes sense that the laundry is the chosen field of the Chinese. Riis links this cleanliness to the "cruel cunning" of the Chinese, who manage to hoodwink authorities into believing that there are no underage girls in their opium dens. Riis relates one legal report of a 13-year-old, abandoned by a father, who was fired from an Eighth Avenue store and wandered until she ended up in a Chinese laundry. Though the judge sent her home to her mother, soon enough she was back in the opium den.

Riis relates one time when he and a policeman tried to stop a Chinese man from beating his white "wife" in a Mott Street cellar. He was shocked when Riis says he would never beat his own wife.

On the telegraph pole in Mott Street the gambling news of the neighborhood—the nightly games and rivalries—is announced. Riis says he doesn't fully understand the politics of the "colony," though he argues that the Chinese pay more attention to their internal politics than to any American laws. Any time there is a murder or other crime, the whole community shelters the perpetrator. The police call the neighborhood quiet, and this is true, Riis says: they prefer to be left alone, though the orderliness is only on the surface. He acknowledges that his judgment may be thought harsh, but that the Chinese are highly undesirable as a population. Still, he suggests that rather than banish the Chinese, the door to immigration should open wider, so that the Chinese man can bring his wife with him rather than remaining a "homeless stranger" among "us."

CHAPTER 10

Leaving Chinatown, Riis arrives in the "Hebrew quarter," centered around Baxter Street. He doesn't need to tell us where we are, he says: the inhabitants' faces and language make it obvious. The youngest women are entrancing, while the older ones are "hags." Here the public schools essentially have to close on Jewish holidays, since only a handful come to school.

Riis makes a typical Progressive-Era moral argument, warning of the danger that Chinese opium represents to the "purity" of white women who find themselves addicted to the drug.



While Riis contrasts the cleanliness of these neighborhoods to the filth of others in New York, he finds a way to make even this, a trait one would expect him to praise, into a sign of the frightening cunning of the Chinese as a group. At the same time, he continues to express concern for the exploitation of young people in tenement neighborhoods.



Riis continues to characterize some of the violence he sees as stemming naturally from ethnic and national differences.



Again, part of Riis's motivation in his methodical, step-by-step exploration of different neighborhoods is to understand the internal workings and logic of each small culture. Here, though, he claims that Chinese customs are so opaque that he cannot hope to comprehend them. As he concludes, his tone shifts slightly, as he argues not that Chinese immigrants should be banned (as many in the Progressive Era did argue) but that they should be encouraged to marry women of their own race—not white women—and establish spaces of domestic harmony from which they can properly assimilate into American society.



Again, Riis relies on common stereotypes and prejudices about what Jewish people look like just as much as he relies on his own powers of observation. Here, his documentary anecdotes are combined with summary judgments about appearance.



This neighborhood is the most densely populated anywhere in the world, Riis says. 58 babies and 38 children occupied one tenement building that officially contained 36 families. Dirty children crowd the hallways and cellars of these places, but tramps are out of place in this area of busy industry, where hard work is the reigning way of life. Thrift is both Jewtown's virtue and its disgrace, Riis says. Materialism is rampant here: he's seen Polish and Russian Jews starving themselves to exhaustion in order to save a little money. The diseases here are due not to intemperance but to lack of suitable food and ventilation, especially since the residents work in their cramped, dingy rooms. Here, everyone stays inside: sometimes a child recovering from small-pox is found crawling around heaps of clothing that will be finished and sold in a Broadway store the next day.

Riis characterizes Jews as eager to fight for their rights in business transactions and to find relief for petty feuds in the power of the law. Riis relates the story of one missionary who, when attempting to preach about Jesus Christ, was afraid he was about to be stoned: for Riis, this is characteristic of the Jews' "stubborn" adherence to their customs and faith. A public school teacher tells Riis of the difficulty he's had in getting his students to wash and keep clean. On the other hand, even the most "ignorant" Polish Jew children know how to count almost before they can talk.

Riis recounts a story of criminals who made a business of setting fire to tenements in order to collect furniture insurance, exposing their fellow-tenants to danger. Once Riis himself saw people throw themselves from windows during a fire, and policemen lined up 13 bodies in the street.

Riis calls the weekly "Pig-market" the best place to study Jewish people's customs. The stalls are dingy but the prices low: the main staples are chickens and geese, once sold live but now finally, as a result of the sanitary authorities, killed at a fowl-market earlier. Hagglng is widespread and intense. Riis wonders why the suspender peddler is omnipresent, since he never sees men wearing them in the neighborhood. People push and shove at each other and shout in foreign tongues, then scatter as the health officers shovel up the musty bread and stale vegetables on the street and carry them to the dump, while people curse at them from the stoops and windows.

Just as Riis had noted the relative cleanliness of the Chinese neighborhoods in order to argue that that quality was actually disreputable, here he makes the tendency to save into a sign of Jews' "materialism" and greed. At the same time, there is some continuity between this and other neighborhoods in terms of the overcrowding and spread of disease so common in the tenements. Riis expects his readers to be particularly shocked that the clothes they are currently wearing may well have been crawled over by a smallpox-ridden child in one of these tenements.



Riis's avowed commitment to assimilation to a Christian, white American way of life means that it's difficult for him to imagine other reasons for Jews not to convert to Christianity other than their "stubbornness." He also continues to draw on stereotypes of Jewish people as money-grubbing as he describes the counting skills of Jewish children.



Riis often relies on anecdotes like this one as evidence for his (in this case racist) arguments: the story of arsonists is meant to underline just how far Jewish immigrants will go in order to make money.



Moving throughout the market, Riis recounts how certain traditions have already been abolished, including the killing of poultry, which now happens off-site. In some ways, this section is one more example of Riis's interest in recording the evocative sights, sounds, and smells of each neighborhood in order to give his readers a better sense of the spaces of which they are so ignorant. But there is also a healthy dose of ethnic prejudice in the way Riis describes the market.



CHAPTER 11

Riis admits that the economy of the Tenth Ward and neighboring districts, home to the Jewish population, has remained a mystery to him despite intense attempts to figure out how it works. Jews have monopolized the business of making cheap clothing, he says. Through ruthless competition they've driven down the price such that it's impossible for workers to make a decent wage.

Most of the work in making sweaters happens in the tenements, free from factory labor laws like a ten-hour work-day limit and child labor restrictions. Riis invites his readers to take the Second Avenue Elevated Railroad to the sweaters' district, where one might glimpse into the shops, with half-naked workers ironing clothes by the window.

Riis recommends getting off at Rivington Street: it's a Sunday evening, the first day of the week in Hebrew law. Up four flights of dark stairs in a Ludlow Street tenement, the smells of frying fish and cabbage pervading the landings, he reaches an apartment with five adults and three teenagers (who lie about their age) sewing knickerbockers or "knee-pants." The faces are black with the color of the cloth; the teenagers glance around, but the adults seem unaware that there's a visitor. The wife of the boss is instructing these newcomers to America in the trade. Riis goes over the workers' weekly wages and the shop profits with her: he wonders how anyone makes a living, but she is ready with a list of exactly how much bread, milk, meat, coffee, and potatoes costs per week.

In the next room knee-pants are also in the process of production, of a still lower quality: the profit is only three and a half cents per item. Each floor here has at least two shops. Riis points out one more hopeful-seeming family: the husband and wife work together with their children and manage to save up money each week. But across the hall is a worker whose four children are too young to work, and can barely manage to pay the rent.

Back on Ludlow Street, Riis passes another double tenement owned by a Jewish politician who is also a liquor dealer. The cheapest apartment there is \$13 per month, and barely deserves the name. One hallway is turned into a shoemaker's shop: to crawl into bed he has to jump over the footboard.

As with the Chinese neighborhoods, here Riis claims that certain groups' traditions and customs are so alien to him that it's impossible, despite his earnest desire to be an ambassador to his readers, for him to "explain" these communities to others.



The Second Avenue Elevated Railroad, already mentioned in the book, is one of the few means of linking the tenement neighborhoods to the more privileged areas of New York home to those Riis assumes will be his readers.



Riis's literary strategy is to first write a kind of tourist guidebook, and then to take his readers by the hand and ask them to imagine that they are visiting a tenement at a particular moment in time—here a Sunday evening. In this imagined visit, we can even smell the fish and cabbage cooking in the tenements. Riis relies on the wife of the boss in this tenement to provide the kind of specific financial accounts that he's always looking for, as he marvels at how anyone is able to make a living and feed their children in such places and with such employment.



Moving from one tenement apartment to the next, Riis observes a certain level of stability in, for instance, the family that is able to make a living by everyone, including the children, pitching in. Yet such stability immediately proves precarious, especially for any family whose children cannot yet work.



Riis often characterizes owners as powerful and absent, but he's also interested in how people in the same community can be either victims or exploiters, or both at different times.



Further down on Broome Street, another tenement is home to a number of different manufacturing shops inside. On the roof, three men are making boys' jackets: Riis describes how the 20 cents for which they're sold are divided among the sewer, ironer, finisher, button-hole-maker, and others. They are lucky enough to have a filling meal at lunch every day, reminding Riis of one Orchard Street restaurant popular with Polish Jews, where large amounts of food are ladled out for 13-15 cents. The major expense in this neighborhood, indeed, is rent, and still the overcrowding is severe—no privacy is to be found. And yet most prefer to live in dire poverty while putting money away in the bank each week.

These, says Riis, are the conditions that enable his manufacturing friend to boast of New York's primacy in making cheap clothing. Riis describes a few unsuccessful tactics at raising standards of living here, but suggests that what first must be done is to teach immigrants English so that they can assimilate. As evening falls, Riis watches exhausted people step outside for a moment's rest. A small, dirty baby tumbles off a tenement step and comes to rest on the stones, its head on his boot.

CHAPTER 12

Riis turns to the Bohemian quarter, where Jewish landlords make lodging contingent on the tenants working for them at exploitative wages: essentially modern serfdom. The Bohemians are comparatively isolated as an ethnic group: Riis says that this is due to stubborn pride, but also to the prejudice that Bohemians are enemies of organized labor and disturbers of the peace. (Riis says this is unfair.)

Many Bohemian immigrants work for cigar factories and live nearby. Owners fill up the tenements around their shops and overcharge for rent, demanding onerous deposits that prevent the tenants from rebelling and leaving. Unlike Polish Jews, Bohemians rarely have large savings, preferring to live as well as their means permit. Men, women, and children work seven days a week in these tenements. The fact that trade unions originally refused to admit women, who in this area are often vital to the families' economy, is a major source of their mutual antagonism.

Riis's aim in detailing exactly how the 20 cents of the jackets are spent is to show how far such a small sum must go, and how little each laborer can extract individually—a result, he argues, of the way in which ruthless competition has worked to squeeze both wages and profits. Although this is true regardless of ethnic group, Riis also wants to claim that it's the tendencies of Jews to save rather than spend that, ironically, also contributes to their dire living conditions.



Riis contrasts the self-satisfied claims of his "manufacturing friend" to the real situation of those working to make New York a prime location for making clothing. Again, Riis emphasizes the Progressive-Era truisms that education is the key to eliminating poverty and that assimilation to a mainstream norm is just as necessary.



While Riis continues to trade in ethnic stereotypes—Bohemians tend to be "proud" and stubborn—here he argues that the specific prejudice about Bohemian anarchism is not based in reality. (At the same time, he seems to link these landlords' exploitation to their Jewish identity.)



Some of what Riis chronicles about ethnic groups is based in objective fact rather than ethnic stereotype: certain groups at the time did, for a variety of historical reasons including immigration trends, tend to be associated with certain occupations. Riis does expose some of the underlying historical factors behind prejudices in explaining the Bohemians' antagonism to trade unions.



Riis declares that his own personal inspections have convinced him that, despite severe poverty, the residents of these tenements live much better than the clothing-makers in the Tenth Ward (despite a recent panic about consumption in this neighborhood). Riis does find that the major source of suffering is the wretched wages and extortionate rents. On East Tenth Street, for instance, one family rents a tiny bedroom at \$12.25 per month and can make about \$10 per week only by working there from six in the morning until nine at night. Bohemian families tend to be large, so when the children are too small to work the situation is constantly precarious.

An old man in the next house answers some of Riis's questions through an interpreter: after nine years, he's learned no English. Though he was a blacksmith in the old country, his lack of English means he can't be here. He and his wife sigh as they admit that they have to make a living, though they would love to start their old trade again.

Ash-barrels stand in front of the tenements on 71st and 73rd Streets, filled with stems of stripped tobacco leaves. One cigar maker who does suffer from consumption lives close by. Until his health gave out, he and his wife could make \$17-25 per week; but now she alone has to support her young children and husband on \$8 per week. She describes how she tries to make that go as far as possible for meals; the week rent is due they have to shrink rations even more.

Riis responds to the accusation that Bohemians are anarchists: he counters that Bohemians love peace like they love music and song. They've been ground down by poverty, isolated and ignorant of English—and yet they are not the “infidels” that many think they are. Education, Riis argues, is the key to instructing them both in English and in Christianity.

CHAPTER 13

Riis begins this chapter by making literal the metaphor of the “color line,” the boundary that excludes African Americans from certain neighborhoods. He describes how landlords actively draw and shade such lines—even if, as he says, their pencils don't make as black a mark as they used to. Their weakening pressure is a hopeful sign, Riis thinks, though this has happened despite and not because of the actions of landlords.

While Riis is committed to exposing shocking levels of poverty and destitution, he also wants to paint a more nuanced picture of the variations in living conditions—in this case, countering other people's panics about high levels of disease. At the same time, he continues to trace a major continuity in all these tenement-house neighborhoods: low wages combined with high rents, leading to unsustainable labor conditions.



Riis expresses a certain amount of moralistic disapproval toward the old man for his lack of English, even as he also relies upon this resident for access to a longer history of immigration and labor.



Sometimes the objective data that Riis cites seem at odds with the impressionistic anecdotes that he recounts. For instance, he'd recently characterized consumption as statistically insignificant. But stories like this one rely on evocative personal experience to supplement, if not replace, hard data.



It's unclear why Riis has chosen to attack Chinese and Jewish populations while defending Bohemians, although in part it seems to be because he thinks it might be easier to encourage them to assimilate to Christian norms.



Riis now discusses the African-American population in New York tenement neighborhoods, and he shows the same kind of compassion that he had directed toward Bohemians. Riis finds the “color line” that discriminates against black people to be a shocking injustice.



Riis explains that since the Civil War, black people have moved to New York from Southern cities at increasingly rapid rates. Unfortunately, trades like carpentry or masonry are barred to black people in the North, so they accept menial unskilled jobs. While the black population was initially confined to the “Africa” neighborhood filled with houses of bad reputation, the increase of other kinds of immigration has meant that this population has expanded elsewhere. The fact that black people have correspondingly become better tenants is, Riis thinks, proof that abhorrent environments (and not innate qualities) debase people. The settlement of black people occupying the East Side from Yorkville to Harlem is, he says, one of the cleanest and most orderly in the city.

Riis points out that though black tenants’ cleanliness is much higher than that of Italians and Polish Jews, they’ve always had to pay higher rents, in part because many white people refuse to live in the same house with them. Still, Riis quotes one large real estate firm as saying that it would prefer black tenants to the “lower grades of foreign white people” as cleaner and steadier tenants. But he reproduces a chart showing how much more black tenants pay than white tenants, a “despotism” that Riis criticizes as stemming from racial prejudice.

Riis discusses the black population’s cheerfulness and optimism in the face of poverty, abuse, and injustice. These tenants, he says, prefer fine clothes and good living to savings in the bank account, and know how to make a pleasant home out of limited resources. Their passion for gambling is their biggest vice, causing them to waste much of their wages, though they do not deal with such loss with much regret.

Riis asks whether “Africa” has been improved now that Italians have begun to move into Thompson Street. He argues that this street in particular has always been a place of moral degradation, for both black and white people. The fights that happen there can be vicious: over three quarters of the policemen’s encounters with the black population take place in this small area. Still, Riis argues that only 25 years after the end of slavery, the relative poverty of the black population has more to do with prejudice and greed by others than its own responsibility.

Riis traces a history of a different kind of immigration, not across an ocean but from the South—where slavery had been abolished only thirty years before he was writing—to the Northern states. Like foreign immigrants, these people came in search of opportunity, but also were met with low wages and shoddy housing. However, this population’s experience allows Riis to underline the connection he wants to draw between housing and moral status, the former creating the latter rather than the other way around.



Here Riis exposes some of the effects of racial discrimination, even while he continues to characterize large swaths of people by lumping them together with their racial or ethnic group. As with his arguments about other communities, such essentialism cuts both ways, causing Riis to alternately condemn or protest certain conditions and standards.



Engaging in more stereotyping, Riis contrasts the collective “personality” of African-American people to other groups like Jews, Italians, or Bohemians, drawing some connections in the process—gambling is a shared pastime among various groups, for instance, while Riis distinguishes and praises black people’s “optimism.”



Here Riis seems to contradict his earlier arguments about the relationship between identity group and character: instead he returns to his major assertion about the ways in which dilapidated environments create a standard of moral degradation for anyone who lives there, no matter the race. Riis’s arguments against racial inequality in this specific sense were quite ahead of his time.



CHAPTER 14

Riis describes another “boundary line” that really defines the Other Half: the line that distinguishes the “flat” from the tenement. Legally these are lumped together—but in reality they’re quite different. First, flats are usually locked, a sign that there is some gesture toward privacy. Below Houston Street there is barely a doorbell to be seen, as well as East of Second Avenue and west of Ninth, and anywhere close to work shops. Gas-houses, slaughter-houses, and docks lead to clusters of tenements, not flats, around them.

Riis adds that, incredibly, many thousands of people do manage to make a living here: wives and mothers are faithful and daughters are innocent even in the worst slums. But these stories are relatively rare, and only serve to show how further many could go if the smallest opportunity were offered to them. He asks readers to enter even “respectable” tenement areas full of hard-working Irish and German immigrants and their descendants, and to learn their way of life, their aims, and ambitions. Then the reader will agree with him that life doesn’t seem “worth living” even there.

Riis then asks his readers to accompany him uptown to the tenement blocks recently built after the last cholera scare: these are set at every which angle, and while there is air here, there is little to see other than rows of board fences and hard brown soil without a single blade of grass. There are no “aesthetic resources” in these tenement houses, only the drab, dreary halls, air shafts, and pumps that characterize what cannot quite be called a home.

Riis says that the Irish have been most vulnerable to the degrading influences of such spaces. The Germans have tried to mitigate these by planting flowers—which, on a tenement block, do the work of many police clubs, Riis argues. The less green there is to be found, the more policemen have to do: the transformation of Tompkins Square from a sand lot into a park got rid of the riots that used to happen there, for instance.

From the “color line” that divides tenement inhabitants by race, Riis moves to another equally invisible but also powerful boundary line. It’s significant that Riis refers to privacy as a key to the distinction between flat and tenement: the Progressive-era commitment to social reform saw a stable, safe family life as the key to a thriving society.



Riis wants to emphasize not the optimistic conclusion that people do make ends meet in the worst circumstances but rather that it’s a miracle they manage to do so—and that even when they do, the philosophical question of life’s value (here he again seems to make a dig at fancy philosophical societies in New York) finds a much more sobering answer.



Riis often lingers over the aesthetic elements of tenement life, drawing attention to things like the lack of green spaces or light. But for him such aspects are not peripheral but rather central to the needs of New York’s poorest citizens, for whom ugliness, poverty, and immorality are inevitably intertwined.



Once again, Riis tries to nuance his argument by making distinctions between different identity groups (even if these distinctions end up seeming less, not more, nuanced), and he continues to stress the connection between beautiful or at least decent-looking spaces and a safe, stable neighborhood.



In hot weather, when life indoors is unbearable, the tenement expands outside and onto the roofs, with residents even sleeping up there. July and August are also the months of heightened infant mortality, despite the Board of Health's work to send "summer doctors" into the tenements and organize fresh-air excursions out of the city. Any epidemic unduly affects the children of the poor, including diseases like the measles that are mere annoyances for the wealthy. It was recently discovered, Riis notes, that the highest tenements have the lowest death rates: this is because these were built in the last decade since sanitary reform, and have followed its laws in everything except overcrowding.

Riis recounts a recent visit to a Mott Street tenement where a child was dying: the "charity doctor" pronounced the cause as improper nutrition, that is, starvation. The father was unable to work as a result of lead poisoning, while the mother and another son were nearly blind from a contagious eye disease. For months, the family had lived on two dollars a week from the priest. The doctor gave directions for treatment, knowing that it would be impossible for them to do more than alleviate the child's suffering.

While rare cases of starvation cause an uproar in the newspapers, Riis notes that in truth death from starvation is much more common than people know, though also more insidious, taking place over a length of time. Sometimes this happens because of drunkenness or carelessness on the part of the parents; but Riis says that in his experience, the condition of the tenements is far more to blame. Scarcity of water contributes directly to drunkenness among the poor, he says. In addition, when people are struggling each day for the bare necessities of life, nothing encourages them to look far ahead; instead, they do whatever they can to get through each day. Children soon learn to live this way as well.

Riis notes the popular myth that there are more evictions in New York each year than in all of Ireland—in fact, he thinks it would be a good thing to be put out of a tenement. But he does argue that the civil courts are among the few places that uphold tenants' rights, making it difficult for landlords to kick out tenants.

If the poor live while paying a premium for shoddy services and lodging, Riis says, then they continue such a practice in death. He questions the "habit" of expensive funerals among the tenement-residents, which only adds to debt and poverty. Though such expense is some consolation to relatives, it is mitigated by the undignified burial in the common trench of the City Cemetery's Poor Burying Ground (or **Potter's Field**), "saving space" by being crowded as they were in life.

Riis tracks the effects of the lack of ventilation that is so characteristic of these tenements. On one hand, it means that people are more likely to loiter on the streets and children are more likely to be tempted into crime, but on the other hand, those who do stay inside become affected by epidemics like measles. Riis does acknowledge certain improvements that laws such as sanitary reform have enacted, even if these have proved insufficient.



This anecdote allows Riis to expose the severe and manifold effects of unsafe, dilapidated living conditions on a single family, from lead poisoning to the spread of contagious disease to starvation stemming from the family's inability to pay exorbitant rents. Such dramatic stories would become a key tool for Progressive-era muckrakers after Riis.



Even while engaging in sensationalist reporting himself, Riis also criticizes the intermittent interest of the public in sensational stories, arguing that the truth is both worse and subtler than his readers can imagine. He also stresses that destitute housing conditions cause moral conditions like (in his view) alcoholism and not the other way around. Here, he traces certain ways that these causal connections unfold in the lives of tenement inhabitants from childhood to adulthood.



While Riis's reporting sometimes tries to counter popular myth with objective fact, he also freely inserts his own opinions and beliefs into his exposé—a use of the first-person perspective that would also become quite influential for later muckrakers.



While Riis tries to sympathetically imagine the reasons for wanting an expensive funeral, he also falls back on a typical moralist argument about the recklessness and extravagance of the poor, and their tendency to overspend on inessentials. Still, he stresses here the indignities of death as well as life for New York's poorest.



CHAPTER 15

Riis turns to the “problem of the children” in the tenements: he’s often tried to count the number of small bodies in each building, but he doubts that anyone has succeeded. Last year, he says, some workmen found the body of a small boy crushed under a pile of lumber, whom no one had missed and no one ever claimed.

Riis argues that the boys growing up in tenements could be profitably trained from an early age to become mechanics, but the trade unions’ “despotism” has prevented that path, meaning that boys are condemned to drudgery or else, if their families have no time to look after them, to peddling or begging. Thus they end up on the street.

Riis argues that these young “savages” are still children at heart: they have a love of beauty that can be seen if one of them ever brings flowers from the fields into a tenement block, brightening the faces of the other children and keeping the peace in a neighborhood better, Riis says, than a policeman would. Most of the time, however, no one has time or energy to fetch flowers from so far away: instead children grow up in dark, dingy homes with only the promise of hard labor awaiting them. Riis quotes the findings of one gentleman’s survey in a downtown public school: of 48 boys 20 had never seen the Brooklyn Bridge, five minutes’ walk away; only three had ever been to Central Park.

Last summer, Riis encountered a small boy at the Police Headquarters. No one knew where he came from, but he was thrilled to have a bed for the night and bread with an egg for breakfast. In response to Riis’s questions, he said that he didn’t go to school nor to church; he never bought bread, only **beer**.

Riis has also seen little girls whose alcoholic father had put them out on the street after their mothers’ death. He contrasts people’s indifference about these children’s lack of knowledge about Christianity to the busy missionary activity of New York Christians on behalf of children thousands of miles away.

Riis describes the work of the Children’s Aid Society, which is attempting to combat this situation by sheltering thousands of homeless or orphaned children. There is also the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to children, which has defended 138,891 children, as well as the asylums and institutions in New York housing 15,000 dependent children. Riis underlines the vast population at stake.

Already Riis has drawn our attention to the many, apparently largely ignored, children crowding the tenements. This would be particularly shocking for Progressive reformers who saw childhood as the key to social improvements.



Riis doesn’t elaborate on what he means by “despotism,” but Progressive reformers were sometimes ambivalent about trade unions, both working with them to pass labor legislation, and remaining suspicious of their gaining too much power.



Once again, Riis stresses that beauty and aesthetic pleasure are not extra luxuries for tenement neighborhoods, but rather essential tools in reforming and improving these areas of the city—here, because children, in his view, are naturally well-inclined to beauty. The statistics Riis cites are meant to shock his readers by exposing how trapped these children remain in their segment of the city, never managing to experience the cultural offerings of New York available to its more privileged populations.



Riis’s anecdote, here stemming from his own reporting rather than heard from someone else, is meant to reveal how early children can be corrupted as a result of poverty and lack of a stable home life.



For Riis, it is scandalous that New York’s wealthy, including reformer types, spend their time agitating to convert foreign populations when there is plenty to be done in their very own hometown.



Riis has already cited reports from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the country’s first child protection agency: he wants to draw attention to their endeavors but also insist that there is much more to be done.



Riis argues that the key to combating poverty is to focus on children before they are corrupted by the influences of the streets and tenements. For now, it's mostly private charity reaching out to them: the city offers only reformatories, workhouses, and prisons.

Riis implies that the government could potentially offer poor children an alternate path just like the private charities whose work he mentions.



CHAPTER 16

One of the barriers against institutions like prisons for children is the Foundling Asylum, collecting 25,000 from the streets over the last twenty years. Only the poor abandon their children, Riis says, and those that are picked up by the police in hallways, on the doorsteps of the rich, and on the streets become wards of the city. After a night at Police Headquarters they are sent to the Infants' Hospital on Randall's Island. Few live much longer than that—65 percent of the 508 received at the hospital died last year (though that number includes those born at the hospitals, so foundlings' mortality is most likely higher).

Although Riis is supportive of institutions like the Foundling Asylum that are already catering to the needs of the poor, here he stresses the overwhelming crisis to which such institutions are responding. Again, for Progressives, children's well-being and education were the key to social improvement and reform, which is partly why Riis spends so much time devoted to the plight of children alone.



In addition, many babies are dead by the time they are picked up, sent ultimately to a trench in the **Potter's Field**. Most of these are found in the East Side, left by unmarried mothers. Others return from the island hospital and deposit their babies at Sister Irene's Asylum on 68th Street. They are asked in return to nurse their own and another baby until both are strong enough to be left. In other cases "pay babies" are sent out to be nursed by other women, whose work pays the rent of hundreds of tenement families.

The Potter's Field has already been mentioned as the place where inequality, destitution, and indignity continue from life into death—a situation only made more tragic when those buried anonymously are abandoned babies and children. The practice of "pay babies" is meant to underline the nuanced variations of desperation among the working poor.



Riis describes the shocking practice of baby-farming, or starving babies to death, in which people make a living by adopting several babies for cash: they feed these babies sour milk until they die, then get an inexperienced doctor to say the death was no fault of their own. Riis has heard of another case in which a step-mother was put on trial for incredibly cruel treatment of a child: the motivation was apparently the tiny amount of insurance on the child's life. Certain companies specialize in insuring children's lives: Riis is appalled by one formal agreement that capped the premium for a child under six at ten cents.

Riis's sensational tales are meant to draw attention to the specific issues facing the city's most vulnerable, youngest residents, but also to return to the major problem of corruption plaguing New York's poorest neighborhoods. Here he explores the depths to which desperate people will go, including inviting a child's death for insurance reasons, but also the more socially acceptable evil of the insurance companies themselves.



Riis expresses relief at turning to the many charities that have sprung up to help the city's most desperate children, from Day Nurseries to Fresh Air Funds, and that have made New York a "cleaner, better, purer" city than it used to be. The Five Points House of Industry is one example, having rescued 60,000 children in total. Riis is touched by the sight of children praying at its nursery school each night.

Even while Riis continues to stress how little has been done to improve the live of New York's poorest, he also wants to draw attention to existing organizations whose work might also remain unknown among many of his readers, and might thus serve as a model for further reform.



CHAPTER 17

Unfortunately, Riis says, such charities and institutions are not enough. Another New York institution is that of the “Street Arab,” who is crowded out of the tenements and has to fend for himself on the streets. He is independent, loves freedom, and refuses to acknowledge any authority other than his own. In winter, he hangs around the newspaper offices, fighting with other vagabonds for warm spots around the grates that let out steam from the underground press-rooms. He sleeps with one eye open, on the lookout for the police, and knows every secret passage and short cut for escape in the city.

Street Arabs are, Riis says, to be found throughout the city, not just on Newspaper Row: they have been found asleep in the end of an iron pipe by the Harlem Bridge or in an old boiler by the East River. The question of where they come from is answered by the regular procession of mothers who stop by the Police Headquarters, though sometimes not for weeks or months after the boys disappear. While the clerks say they’ll return when they’re hungry, it’s more often the case that their hunger caused them to flee.

One child Riis encountered at the Newsboys’ Lodging House told him that he was one of six children, and had no father: some of them had to abandon home, so he started to make a living by blacking boots. While such boys might easily end up in prison, there are several institutions that have sprung up to protect him, including the lodging-houses and schools of the Children’s Aid Society. Such places are convinced that cleanliness is the first step toward morality, so they insist only on regular washing: otherwise the boys remain free to come and go as they please. If they cannot afford to pay they are given a loan, though expected to pay it back as soon as they’re able; they rarely betray this trust.

Riis describes the night schools and Sunday night meetings that foster a sense of community in the lodging-houses and help develop the boys’ character. Still, they can remain boisterous and rowdy. One night Riis tried without much success to photograph the boys as they were washing up for dinner. One of them took on the role of rueful manager, apologizing to him that the boys wouldn’t stay still.

This chapter is another example of Riis’s ethnographic interest in documenting different populations. A “Street Arab” was a common name for any child living on the streets, regardless of his or her ethnic background—though the derogatory use of the term “Arab” reflects Riis’s generally ambivalent attitude, between sympathy and suspicion, toward different populations.



Riis suggests that part of the reason for these children’s abandonment of home is the lack of care, attention, and even daily necessities provided to them by their parents. Progressive reformers tended to stress the importance of a safe, productive family life, and here Riis exposes how poverty can work to damage such family bonds.



Throughout this chapter, Riis switches between the modes of narrative explanation and visual description, between serving as detached expert and as tour guide. Here he first describes an encounter with one boy at a specific place, then fills in further information and context for his reader that takes place outside the timeline of his visit to the Newsboys’ Lodging. This dual-pronged strategy is a key part of Riis’s effort toward both maintaining interest among his readers and educating them.



Riis is clearly in favor of such schools, which embrace education—a key tenet of Progressive-era reforms—and also allow a safe space for what he sees as boys’ natural tendency toward boisterous activity. Here such rowdiness is benign rather than ominous, as it is on the streets.



In total, 12,153 boys and girls found lodging and education in these homes last year. In addition, the daily average attendance at all the industrial schools also run by the Society was 4,105: these included 1,132 children of alcoholic parents and 416 that had been found begging in the streets. The Society also regularly sends children to the Far West to escape the temptations of the city. It keeps tabs on all of them, and nearly all become successful members of their communities. Riis describes the work of the wealthy Mrs. Astor, who sent a total of 1,300 homeless boys to good homes over the course of her life. Indeed, most of the lodging houses he's described were built by some rich person or family.

Riis also describes an uptown lodging house that was built by the young men who now benefit from it—an ideal means, he thinks, of both combating homelessness and encouraging hard work among New York's young poor. Riis cites the example of the philanthropist Colonel Auchmuty, who has established trade schools that may eventually stamp out the phenomenon of the Street Arab.

CHAPTER 18

Riis now turns to the reign of saloons in downtown New York: he once counted 4,065 below 14th Street, compared to 111 Protestant churches and chapels. They are more prevalent wherever the poorest tenements are to be found, and take the place of any reading-room or coffee-shop that might otherwise occupy the storefronts of these neighborhoods.

Riis quotes Health Department statistics that show just how concentrated the saloons are in the city's most wretched areas. Many of these saloons are owned by wealthy and prominent New York citizens, a number of whom have positions as city and state politicians. There are also, though, many saloons that remain unlicensed and largely uncounted.

Though the saloons may hang signs announcing that they won't sell to children, that ostensible submission to the law is little more than a joke. Riis recounts a story from the newspaper about a boy who carried **beer** all day one Saturday to his father's shop on the East Side, and who crept into a cellar to sleep off the effects of his own drinking: not until Monday morning was he found dead. The saloon breeds poverty, corrupts politics, and fosters crime, Riis says—but its worst influence is on the child, trapped by the "growler" (slang for a container holding beer).

Riis transitions from a sympathetic narrative account of one lodging-house to a data-driven analysis of how such homes operate in New York. He wants to stress how impressive these numbers are, citing the Society as a model for further reform. While Riis is eager to promote changes on the level of government, he also thinks that private philanthropy and individual initiatives are ways for wealthy people to actually intervene in support of the "other half," rather than ignoring or actively harming them.



While Riis embraces philanthropy, he (like other contemporary reformers) can also be suspicious of pure charity, since he thinks New York's poor should be motivated to work. Initiatives like these that put people to work thus seem especially promising to him.



For Riis, places like coffee-shops or reading-rooms should—like parks and other green spaces—be cornerstones of housing reform. We can't afford to think of them as extra benefits, he argues, since they directly influence the state of the neighborhood.



Here Riis draws attention to the tragic irony that many of New York's wealthiest citizens, even while claiming to know nothing about the plight of the city's poorest, actually benefit by exploiting and corrupting these populations.



Riis's direct experience with these saloons is supplemented by other stories, including this anecdote from a newspaper. Many Progressive reformers of the time wanted to ban the sale of alcohol entirely (and by 1920, they would temporarily succeed). The fact that children in these neighborhoods reportedly drank beer like their parents would have been particularly shocking to many readers.



CHAPTER 19

Riis continues discussing the influence of the “growler,” which can easily accompany a child through life. There are few other options for play and leisure for children of the tenements. Instead, they fall in to the life of gangs, another New York institution, made up of the American-born sons of immigrants. Gangs, too, reflect the conditions of the tenements that formed them.

Riis characterizes the purpose of the gangs as one of bravado and robbery. In one week last spring, six murder-assaults were recorded by the newspapers in the streets—and Riis imagines that the police probably suppressed more stories. Gang violence usually breaks out in sporadic pockets, rising up first in one neighborhood, then in another.

Riis describes the typical gang member as cowardly rather than fierce, only able to hunt in a pack. Eager to drink and curse, he is as likely to attack a policeman as to try to save a drowning child or woman. Riis acknowledges that his degradation might well have been turned to nobleness if he had been raised in different conditions. Riis describes one famous New York tough, McGloin, who murdered an unarmed saloonkeeper one night, but then refused to run for it and instead was arrested and sent to the gallows.

Riis once tried to photograph a group of young gang members passing the growler around after some kind of raid. “Toughs” love to pose for pictures, he says, and they soon were staging the photographs themselves. Not long after he took the photos, he called at the police station and found a few of the boys under arrest for robbing a Jewish peddler just after Riis had left them. Not far from their haunts, a young boy was recently beaten to death by the “Alley Gang”; Riis found some members of the gang asleep the next morning in same row of rear tenements home to the murdered boy. The other residents seemed terrified of the young boys. In other neighborhoods, though, all the residents collude in the gangs’ crimes and help them avoid the police. As a result, the police leave them alone, unless they come within swinging distance and can hit them with their clubs.

Riis has heard of one “Murderers’ Alley” that had become a well-trodden lair for gangs. The Board of Health suggested that the owner build a brick wall so that it would be impossible to reach the small passage from the streets; in a few months, the entire character of the tenement house changed.

The “growler” is a jug used to carry and pass around beer. Riis uses the term as a metonymy: that is, “growler” actually refers to the beer that it contains and, more abstractly, to the temptation of alcoholism that will remain with these children for life.



Having guided his readers imaginatively around the various tenement neighborhoods of New York, Riis now invites us to imagine the “disease” of gang violence spreading throughout the various areas with which we are now familiar.



Riis’s ethnographic language is now used to describe another urban “type,” the gang member. Riis does emphasize, again, how conditions can create crime: his anecdote about McGloin suggests that there may be a certain underlying nobility, though unfortunately misdirected by life circumstances, among some gang members.



The photographs that accompanied How the Other Half Lives were sometimes meant to seem candid, but Riis also explicitly acknowledges that many of them were also staged (indeed, given the camera technology available at the time, it would have been quite difficult to take entirely un-staged pictures). Here Riis fills in some of the context and background for the photographs that his readers may already have seen in his articles. As is the case throughout the book, photographs and narrative are meant to work together in support of reform.



This is another example of Riis’s penchant for proposing minor aesthetic changes to the housing landscape—arguing that such changes can ultimately have major effects on a neighborhood.



This area was also the home of Whyo Gang, finally disbanded a few years ago when its leader was caught and hanged for murder; but other gangs have sprung up in its place. Inspector Byrnes has told Riis that the younger members are tougher and cleverer than the more seasoned criminals. Indeed, over 10,000 of the more than 82,000 people arrested in 1889 were under 20 years old.

Riis lists the names of some of the most well-known groups, including the Rock Gang, the Rag Gang, and the Stable Gang. They hide along the streets late at night, rarely bothering the quiet, dutiful worker but instead pouncing on the tipsy or otherwise vulnerable. They keep up the pretense of belonging to a social “club” in order to blackmail local politicians or storekeepers during their annual “thieves’ ball.” They ask for “voluntary” contributions for this affair, though under threat of a late-night visit from the gang if no contribution is forthcoming.

Eventually, thieves usually do end up being caught, the most serious among them hanged. Only a few manage to be reformed; the rest return to their old ways after prison. There’s only one silver lining that Riis can find in this situation: he and others have learned that any anti-gang initiative must start with the economic conditions that gave rise to such groups.

Inspector Byrnes makes another appearance as a crucial source of insider information for Riis. Here, his major point is that gangs are especially successful at corrupting the city’s most vulnerable youth, and that crime, violence, and insecure childhoods are intertwined.



Riis continues his ethnography-infused account of New York’s neighborhoods by chronicling different kinds of groups: each gang has its own characteristic identity. For Riis, who is such a believer in the power of voluntary associations and educational and social clubs, it’s particularly perverse that these gangs masquerade as such organizations.



Even as Riis condemns the behavior and actions of these gangs, he continues to stress that it is less the innate character of the members themselves than their environment that bears responsibility.



CHAPTER 20

Riis quotes a report from the Working Women’s Society, which argues that men’s wages never sink below a certain limit, but there is no such limit to the depths of women’s wages. And if they cannot make a living as a saleswoman, many find it necessary to turn to the “paths of shame.” Riis has heard of one woman, unable to eke out a living on her own, who threw herself out a window rather than embarking on prostitution. She was one of at least 150,000 women who have to support themselves in New York, often receiving as little as than \$1.75 per workweek of 16-hour days. Girls are often told to lie about their age in order to be able to work, though truant officers rarely check.

Riis lists the expenses of one woman employed in the manufacturing department of a Broadway store. She usually received three dollars a week: half goes for her room, she has a cup of coffee for breakfast, and no lunch. She is young and pretty, and might well marry young and imprudently—a reasonable solution even if such marriages are, according to many, a cause of major distress among the poor.

Having detailed a number of the ethnic and racial communities of New York’s tenements, as well as of other social “types,” Riis now moves on to discussing the specific difficulties faced by women. As with some other (though certainly not all) groups, Riis shows himself to be ahead of his time in terms of attempting to understand rather than condemn different behaviors—here, prostitution, which provides greater stability for some women than other kinds of work.



Riis acknowledges the arguments of other Progressive-era reformers that poor women are only harming their own chances at upward mobility by marrying young. Instead of condemning these choices, though, he asks us to imagine why these women find themselves making them.



Riis describes the testimony of one girl before the State Board of Arbitration during a recent shirt makers' strike. She worked eleven hours in the shop and four at home, and had to find her own thread and pay for her sewing machine out of her wages. Meanwhile, many clothing firms now have their work done by farmers' daughters in Maine, who are happy to earn 2-3 dollars a week as extra money—driving down the wages in New York. Riis asks his readers not to be amazed at the poor quality of work done in the tenements as a result.

At the start of the chapter, Riis had argued that women's work is even more precarious than men's in the tenement neighborhoods. This is in part because women are expected to bear more of the expenses of their own work; but in addition, the uneven nature of industrialization has created unsustainable levels of competition between urban and rural workers.



Riis recounts visiting a West Side tenement last Christmas, where an old woman had just been stricken with paralysis: her sister sat by her bedside in despair. They had come 40 years ago from Ireland as lace embroiderers. As the years went on, wages continued to fall, and they had to work harder as they grew older and tired, faced with the constant threat of starvation or the poor-house. Riis asks a hypothetical moralist if he would blame the younger version of such women for choosing prostitution instead.

Here Riis traces one specific story of immigration, poverty, and female labor. Rather than make better wages and secure improved living conditions over time, these women instead found themselves living in ever-greater precariousness—in part because of the large-scale national changes Riis has just described.



Riis notes that most New York working girls are hard-working, virtuous, and reluctant to complain, always showing a cheerful face to the world. Slowly society is realizing that women's work needs to be properly compensated and supported, as revealed by the rise of unions and working girls' clubs. Riis is encouraged by such changes.

Riis concludes his sketch of New York "working girls" by arguing for their upstanding moral character. While this is in a way another kind of identity-based essentialism, here such sweeping judgments are meant to improve the lot of working women.



CHAPTER 21

Riis imagines that at this point the reader won't be shocked to learn that over the past 8 years, 135,595 New York families have sought charity. But the reader might still be struck that nearly a tenth of those who died in the city during that period were buried in the **Potter's Field**. These statistics are rigorously researched, but they are almost certainly incomplete. Riis estimates that about 6.5 percent of the New York population is entirely helpless: orphans, the disabled, or very old. More than half of the poor were so because they could not find work; one-sixth were professional beggars and were training their children accordingly. The Potter's Field, in particular, represents absolute desperation—the hope of a decent burial is the last to which the poor will cling.

Riis uses the general term of the Potter's Field to refer to several graveyards and burying grounds throughout the city. His intention is to stress the ways in which anonymity and lack of care for the poor continues from life into death. Riis also returns to his earlier statements about the importance that poor tenement residents place on a decent burial: that this too is so often denied them only underlines the ways in which poverty is intertwined with the lack of basic dignity offered to this population.



Riis records that the families receiving charity lived in more than 31,000 different tenements, where he argues that pauperism (by which he means receiving relief either officially or by begging) grows like a weed, its growth favored by the environment. The pauper's absolute hopelessness distinguishes him from the honestly poor, Riis thinks, though the line is blurred in the tenement, which houses both groups.

Riis distinguishes between "poverty" and "pauperism"—while the former is a result of social conditions and should be met with compassion, Riis is a typical Progressive in proclaiming the moral benefits of honest work, and has little patience for "paupers" or the non-working poor.



Riis compares the beggar to the “tough” who thinks the world owes him a living, but the beggar doesn’t have the nerve to resort to violence, instead becoming a master strategist. Riis has encountered a number of beggar women holding what seemed like an infant, but turned out to be a bundle of rags. He knows one story of an Italian woman arrested for begging with a little girl whose rags were meant to elicit sympathy; an investigation showed the woman to be a “pauper capitalist,” making hundreds of dollars a year.

Making begging a crime has lowered the number of offenses, Riis says, but there are still thousands arrested each year. He is struck by the fact that the Irish are the nationality most likely to beg: Italians, who Riis thinks are adept at begging back home, account for less than 2 percent. He notes that Italians come to America to work, and are thus relatively immune from the corrupting influence of the tenement, while this is not the case for the Irish.

Riis lists a number of other cases of fraud, in which families prefer to elicit donations rather than work honestly. He argues that the amount of real suffering among the poor only renders reform more vital, such that beggars must work if they want to eat. He tells of a Health Department report from last July that a family with a sick child was in desperate straits at an uptown tenement. By the time a doctor arrived, the child was dead, and the other children were crying for food. What was needed, Riis argues, was work and living wages, not charity, which instead only worsens the situation and makes people dependent.

Riis says that \$8,000,000 is spent on public and private charity each year in New York, and suggests that those funds instead be invested in a labor bureau that would join employers with those seeking work. But the best source of reform is the tenement, built precisely to house paupers and professional beggars. Though the tenement and the pauper might never be entirely eradicated, reforming the former is the best way to attack the existence of the latter.

For Riis, the “strategies” of paupers are morally repulsive because they involve deception rather than an attempt at honest work. While he expresses shock and disgust at the conditions of those who toil to the point of illness or death, in a way he seems to think that’s preferable to those who resort to begging in order to survive.



Here Riis speculates freely on the reasons that immigrants of certain nationalities are more likely to be beggars in New York than others. At some points in the book, he is careful to trace cause and effect through history, but here he relies more on received truths and stereotypes than on data or analysis.



Here Riis continues to underline the importance of drawing a distinction between pauperism and poverty. He argues that the prevalence of the former is actually impeding reforms that would improve the lot of the working poor. While Riis has spent some time promoting the work of private philanthropy, he is convinced that “charity,” that is, direct transfer of money or other benefits to the poor, is not the best way to combat poverty.



Like many other Progressive reformers, Riis understands a strong work ethic to be a powerful means of reform, and something to be preferred to pure charity. He also reiterates his conviction that housing conditions are directly conducive to moral as well as economic and social status.



CHAPTER 22

Riis blames pauperism for the process by which society associates poverty with the need for punishment rather than compassion and reform. He asks his reader to just briefly glance at the penitentiary on the islands next to Manhattan. Sometimes the desire to return to the saloon is so great that a prisoner risks his life to escape and swim to shore. Next to it is the workhouse, what he calls the “summer resort” of the slums, where little productive work is actually accomplished. Next to that is the almshouse, where rows of old women smoke, knit, or idle and grumble from morning to night. When Riis asked the warden if he could “take” them (that is, their picture), the warden was delighted and urged him to take the thousand of them. Riis notes that many of these old people have been sent to the almshouse by their children to die. Society pays for them, but it’s hardly a pleasant way to end one’s life.

Riis next watches the women of Blackwell’s Island Asylum walk by, strapped to a rope because their diagnosis, “suicidal mania,” means they cannot be trusted with the river in sight. The asylum houses an average of 1,700 women, and the men’s asylum on Ward’s Island is even larger. A doctor tells Riis that no one who is sent to one of these places ever returns to the city cured and free. Instead they’re sent back to what Riis calls a “whirlpool” of crime and poverty until reaching the **Potter’s Field**.

Riis now turns to the “alcoholic cells” at Bellevue Hospital, which held 3,694 prisoners last year. Altogether, the prisons, workhouses, hospitals, almshouses, and asylums in New York admitted 138,332 people in 1889. Over two million dollars was spent on them; together with the cost of the police and the criminal courts, Riis concludes, the total price of maintaining a “standing army” of paupers, criminals, and the sick poor is over seven million dollars per year.

CHAPTER 23

Riis tells a recent anecdote of a man, poor and hungry, who was in such despair at the sight of carriages rolling up Fifth Avenue, at the contrast between the wealthy shoppers and his children crying for bread, that he jumped into the crowd with a knife and starting slashing about. He was arrested and probably lies forgotten in an asylum today: but the carriages continue to roll by.

Again, by distinguishing non-working “paupers” from the hardworking but desperate poor, Riis feels that he can lobby for better conditions for the latter group, while continuing to condemn the former group for its laziness and weak work ethic. But the city, he argues, blurs the line between the two by punishing even the hardworking poor for their inability to pay the rent or create stability for their families. Tenement-house reform, to Riis, is wildly preferable to the punitive kinds of housing that he explores here, from the almshouse to the workhouse, where the domestic ideal that he imagines is warped beyond recognition.



For Riis, places like the Blackwell’s Island Asylum are precisely the opposite of the kinds of housing reform that New York needs. By stepping outside the tenement neighborhoods themselves, he shows how the shocking conditions perpetuated within these neighborhoods are also continued at city-run institutions beyond Manhattan.



Riis adds up the populations served at these institutions, as well as the cost to taxpayers, to emphasize the extent of the problem and to ask his readers to imagine what else might be done—and done better—with such huge expenditures. As it is, he argues, these institutions do not reform but rather “maintain” a population trapped in poverty.



This especially vivid and haunting anecdote doesn’t tell us much that is new about the inequality between rich and poor in New York itself: instead it underlines the damaging psychological (as well as economic and social) effects of such vast differences in living conditions.



Riis says that this man was only resorting to a possibility that many have long feared, that the lower classes will rise up in violence. The only other option, he says, is that of justice. Riis imagines a reasonable-sounding person telling him that the tenements aren't so bad as he claims, that they don't look too shabby—some even have brown-stone fronts. This is true, he admits, in some of the newer tenements: but in any case, one must look beneath the surface to truly understand the situation.

Riis says that we are all products of our physical and moral conditions, but that in the case of the tenements this is hardly reassuring. But the “dangerous classes” of New York are dangerous less because of their crimes than because of the “criminal ignorance” of the privileged. A class of whom nothing is expected, he says, will remain ignored as well as impoverished.

Riis recalls an important meeting at Chickering Hall two years ago, where many discussed how to instruct this mass of over a million people in good Christian morals. But at no point, he says, was the question asked how love of God can be inculcated in people who have only witnessed human greed. A minister once asked him if he's forgetting the inner man in exchange for focusing on people's material conditions: Riis responded that there's no inner man to appeal to in the tenements, and that the first action should be to situate someone in a place where he can respect himself.

CHAPTER 24

In response to the question of what has been done for the tenement-house problem in New York for the past 20 years, Riis notes that the law has made attempts, though there have been many obstacles to its success. Still, one improvement has been to make it illegal to construct tenements over an entire lot, so as to entirely block out air and sunlight. Similarly, public outcry has increased, even if it usually only rears up sporadically in response to a particularly blatant or disgraceful affair. This unsteady interest accounts in part for the slow progress of the authorities in dealing with the problem. Much stronger effort is needed to pressure landlords against neglect. It's harder to convince a landlord that he's killing his tenants just as a thief steals property, since the process is so slow and gradual.

As Riis prepares to conclude his book, he introduces yet another reason (though one latent throughout) that his readers should join him in seeking reform: the alternative is that the desperation and insecurity hidden behind the placid brown-stone fronts will break out, and the effects of such desperation will finally reach the more privileged.



Riis delivers a stinging rebuke to the complacency of New York's more privileged residents, denying them the right to claim ignorance by arguing that their ignorance itself is not just immoral but criminal.



Riis returns to a moment earlier in the book, when he'd cited the words of an unnamed Brooklyn builder who had asked how those who have only seen greed can possibly learn how to be proper moral Christians. Many Progressive-era reformers were concerned with how to develop a moral, usually Christian, citizenry: here Riis argues that there are material pre-conditions that must be met before such instruction can prove effective.



Throughout his narrative, Riis has expressed support for various reforms and improvements that have been implemented both by government action and by private philanthropy. Still, part of his purpose has been to draw attention to the partial and even haphazard nature of such changes, arguing instead that the kind of reform needed is systematic and comprehensive. Exposing the causal connections between landlords' neglect and the deprivation—and even illness and starvation—of many tenants is one step forward.



Riis acknowledges that housing the poor must probably, though sadly, remain a business: as a charity it will always fail. Still, he reflects that if model tenements are expertly managed, it would do a great deal of good. Riis compares the work of business in wiping out the worst tenements to Napoleon III, the French emperor who ordered the demolition and modern rebuilding of Paris in the 1850s. Riis recalls returning to one tenement after a few short weeks to find it entirely gone, with an army of workmen laying a new foundation for a warehouse.

Riis describes one well-intentioned tenement building effort that failed. Called “Big Flat” and built as a model tenement, it soon became home to thieves and gangs, who took advantage of two open streets—which the builders had assumed would be a decent means of ventilation—to turn the neighborhood to their own advantage.

Riis describes the poorest New Yorkers as “shiftless, destructive, and stupid,” but also says that the tenements have made them this way. He tells the story of a philanthropist who decided to fit out the tenement house he owned with tubs, decent plumbing, and wood-closets: rather than be grateful, his tenants used the wood-closet boards for kindling and sold the pipes and faucets for cash at the junk shop. Since then he’s been convinced of the depravity of tenement residents, without understanding the importance of education.

Riis admits that education works slowly: he’s seen the police break up **beer** dives only to see them rearrange themselves and become ever more destructive. The rapid increase in and heightened crowding of the tenement population only worsens the issue: from 468,492 residents in 1869, the number is now over 1,250,000, and people continue to stream into the cities. Workers will always sacrifice comfort to live near their work, he says.

Another problem Riis cites is the absentee landlord, who owns the building but washes his hands of anything that happens there: as a result, any official attempts to improve accountability prove highly difficult, when the landlords can hardly be found.

Riis characterizes as a necessary evil the need for housing reform to remain tied to business. Many Progressive reformers fought against what they saw as the overweening domination of corporations and business interests in America; but the Progressivist insistence on a strong work ethic also made these reformers sympathetic to smaller-scale business initiatives.



Riis acknowledges that some attempts at reform and improvement will inevitably fail: nonetheless, he implies that it’s only by learning from mistakes such as this one that tenement-housing reform has any chance of success.



Here Riis does agree with those of his contemporaries who were eager to characterize the poor as lazy and thus deserving of their lot. Without entirely dismissing this diagnosis, Riis reiterates what he’s been arguing all along: that people’s moral status is a product, not a cause, of their economic and social conditions, and that landlords and others need to understand that background.



Again, Riis admits that any attempts at improvement will have to struggle against various factors, including immigration, population increase, and wage stagnation (which makes workers even more likely to prefer to live closer to where they work). Any hope of housing reform in particular will have to navigate such realities.



While Riis has examined the ways that people within the same neighborhood can be victims or exploiters (or both), he also stresses subtler, more nefarious kinds of corruption.



But good management is, Riis argues, the key to reform: the best idea is to have a competent manager who can be accountable to everything that's going on there. Tenants respond eagerly to fair efforts on their behalf. The change in the African-American population's "character" since they've moved to more decent tenements in Yorkville is one example. Riis also recalls visiting a dingy, dark tenement in the Tenth Ward which he knew had a bad reputation, but which was now home to a new housekeeper who had single-handedly improved the surroundings—and, as a result, the character of those living there.

Riis acknowledges the benefits of philanthropy in the tenements, especially in that charitable missions have brought the well-to-do and the poor within speaking distance of each other in a way that rarely otherwise happens—even if much remains to be done.

CHAPTER 25

Riis briefly sketches out what he sees to be the housing situation in New York, centered around the rights of tenement inhabitants to live in Manhattan and to be housed decently for the high amount that they're paying. The sanitary, moral, and economic security of both "halves" of New York depends on the decent housing of the poor—and creating such housing can be a good and productive business model.

Riis admits that it may well be ideal to get rid of the tenement itself, but that is entirely impracticable: instead we must figure out what to do with it. Riis recently watched a landlord give a rundown building a coat of paint: that alone will not solve things. Instead, he argues that there are three ways of dealing with tenements: by law, by remodeling old houses, and by building new model tenements. Private enterprise must take up the latter two options, while the arrest and punishment of landlords who violate law and decency will go a long way. Riis throws out a few other suggestions about legal reforms.

Riis suggests that landlords should ally themselves to the law rather than fighting it. Ideally their investment in their property now will pay for itself in future value. He cites the example of a Miss Ellen Collins, who bought three old tenements ten years ago and has worked to rehabilitate and remodel them, in part by letting light into the hallways. She set the rents as low as possible to both get a return on her investment and promote stability among the tenants; she outfitted the houses with proper plumbing; and today the homes are bright and cheerful, with no tenant problems.

Riis has already argued that the best way to reform tenements is to make housing into a sustainable business plan. Here, one way that he proposes this be done is through the introduction of intermediaries like managers or housekeepers, whose main purpose and objective is to keep these homes safe, clean, and well-maintained. Those simple changes, he argues, will have profound effects.



Riis continues to balance his arguments in favor of business-based reform with his largely positive outlook on private philanthropy (perhaps at least in part due to his readership).



As Riis concludes, he returns to the argument he's been making that reforming the tenement-housing situation will not just help New York's poorest while costing its most privileged—instead, the entire population will benefit from such changes.



In some sections of the book, Riis simply points out and draws attention to horrifying living and working conditions; now, his major concern is to propose pragmatic solutions, including partial ones. He does seem to suggest that purely aesthetic solutions alone—giving a building a new coat of paint—will be insufficient, but in this context, such an argument seems mainly meant to encourage more radical change in addition.



In the ideal society envisioned by many Progressive-era reformers, the law would not be an impediment to social change but a key aspect of social reform, working together with the private sector rather than against it. Here, Riis notes one example of how public-private partnerships might work: Miss Collins is not just a philanthropist but also a successful businesswoman.



Riis admits that others have tried such reforms with little success—though this, he says, is because they’ve tired of it before the tenements had been fully “redeemed,” so they lapsed back into their former condition. Sadly, the lack of interest in the poor on the part of landlords is partly responsible for this.

Personal interest in the affairs of the poor must also be the case for the building of model tenements. Riis argues that, while many are skeptical that such projects will work in New York as they have in other cities, he’s personally aware of several successful initiatives. Riis admits that other cities’ plans, like Philadelphia’s to house the working classes in cottages, won’t work in Manhattan—but that’s why more concentrated, but not overcrowded, tenements are a potential solution. He cites the example of 13 houses built by the Improved Dwellings Association nine years ago. Despite unexpected expenses and amenities unknown among the poor, like coal lifts and common laundry in the basement, Riis has visited and found the operation to be fully successful.

Riis describes another “experiment” by the Tenement House Building Company in Cherry Street, home to many Russian Jews, in an area that’s more dangerous. Still, even these houses are well-kept and have also returned an interest on the invested capital. There was an original idea of making the tenants themselves profit-sharers on rent insurance, but it hasn’t yet come to fruition, though similar projects are happening elsewhere. Riis cites the example of a Brooklyn builder, Mr. A.T. White, who has built homes for 500 poor families and allowed good tenants a share in the profits in exchange for prompt payment and order.

Riis argues that if owners can be content with a 5-6 percent return on investment, model tenements can be successful: additional greed will ruin the opportunity. Just building a single good tenement is the first step to reforming the entire neighborhood, he says.

Riis concludes that he’s attempted to tell the truth as he saw it in order to do his part in encouraging justice. He recalls a recent visit to the sea, watching children playing in the surf: he was told as he watched that during winter storms this same sea swept easily across any manmade barrier in a destructive wave. Riis compares this wave to the sea of the tenement population: if it swells again from despair and enclosure, nothing will be strong enough to hold it back. Returning to the Lowell poem that served as epigraph, Riis ends on a note of warning about what might happen if the poor continue to be crushed.

Riis argues that the failures of other reformers before him are not because reform itself is doomed, but because the changes actually didn’t go far enough—what’s needed is to maintain and expand such reforms, not curtail them.



Here, Riis continues to elucidate a central belief driving his book—that if readers, shocked and appalled by the stories of New York’s tenement neighborhoods and by the photographs that serve as evidence for such tales, truly begin to care about the lives of the poor, they will be more likely both to give time and money themselves and to lobby for government reforms. Riis also stresses that each city is unique, so while it is possible to learn from other cities’ techniques, any change must be adapted to the specific needs of New Yorkers.



Riis preempts the objection that he’s focusing on comparatively well-to-do tenements and more orderly populations, by arguing that the models he’s proposing are reproducible and expandable. The Brooklyn builder that Riis cites here may well be the same he had quoted at the beginning, who’d asked how the poor could ever have a model for good behavior if all they see is greed: his work is meant to counter that standard.



While Riis is encouraging tenement-house reform as a business investment, he also cautions that moderation is the key to success both for tenants and owners.



This final anecdote reflects Riis’s ongoing union of journalistic objectivity with metaphoric, highly literary imagery. While he could have ended on the previous note of optimism about the possibility of reform, his choice to end with a more ominous image is part of his general didactic and moralizing purpose—this is his final chance to encourage his readers to embrace reform.





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