

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*



Published in 1890, this book exposed the horrible living conditions of poverty in New York City tenements, where the primary residents were immigrant families. The recent invention of flash photography allowed Riis to visually depict the living conditions of the poor, which shocked many citizens of the upper and middle classes who were unaware of the dangerous conditions of the slums.

*The book opens up to the reader as if they have a tour guide through the immigrant slums of New York introducing them to the common tenement building.*

Excerpt One: “Be a little careful, please! The hall is dark and you might stumble over the children pitching pennies back there. Not that it would hurt them; kicks and cuffs are their daily diet. They have little else. Here where the hall turns and dives into utter darkness is a step, and another, another. A flight of stairs. You can feel your way, if you cannot see it. Close? Yes! What would you have? All the fresh air that ever enters these stairs comes from the hall-door that is forever slamming, and from the windows of dark bedrooms that in turn receive from the stairs their sole supply of the elements God meant to be free, but man deals out with such a [cheap and unwilling] hand. That was a woman filling her pail by the hydrant you just bumped against. The sinks are in the hallway, that all the tenants may have access—and all be poisoned alike by their summer stench. Hear the pump squeak! It is the lullaby of tenement house babies. In summer, when a thousand thirsty throats pant for a cooling drink in this block, it is worked in vain... Listen! That short hacking cough, that tiny, helpless wail—what do they mean? They mean that the soiled bow of white you saw on the door downstairs will have another story to tell—Oh! A sadly familiar story—before the day is at an end. The child is dying of measles. With half a chance it might have lived; but it had none. The dark bedroom killed it.”

**Key Points:**

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*Tenement owners would typically rent out beds to travelers, workers or the homeless in the first floor of a building. Below describes pricing.*

Excerpt Two: “The twenty-five cent lodging- house keeps up the pretense of a bedroom, though the head-high partition enclosing a space just large enough to hold a cot and a chair and allow the man room to pull of his clothes in the shallowest of all pretenses. The fifteen-cent bed stand boldly forth without screen in a room full of bunks with sheets as yellow and blankets as foul. At the ten-cent level the locker for the sleeper’s clothes disappears. There is no longer need of it. The [person] limit is reached, and there is nothing to lock up safe...”

**Key Points:**

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*A major concern that developed was the conditions that children lived and played in. Many children were very close to work yards and seemed to be completely unsupervised.*

Excerpt Three: “I tried to count the children that swarmed there, but could not. Sometimes I have doubted that anybody knows just how many there are about. Bodies of drowned children turn up in the rivers right along in the summer whom no one seems to know anything about. When last spring some workmen, while moving a pile of lumber on a North River pier, found under the last plan the body of a little lad crushed to death, no one has missed a boy, though his parents soon afterwards turned up.”

**Key Points:**

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*An additional social concern for the children was that they were growing up in filth, crime, alcohol, and ignorance.*

Excerpt Four: “There was a big tenement in the Sixth Ward, not happily appropriated by the beneficent spirit of business that blots out so many foul spots in New York—it figured not long ago in the official reports as “an out- and- out- hogpen”—that had a record of one hundred and two arrests in four years among its four hundred and seventy-eight tenants, fifty-seven of them for drunken and disorderly conduct. [ ¼ of the tenants have been arrested, and half of all arrests were alcohol related] I do not know how many children there were in it, but the inspector reported that he found only seven in the whole house who owned that they went to school. The rest gathered all of the instruction they received running for beer for their elders. Some of them claimed that the “flat” as their home as a mere matter of form. They slept in the streets at night. The official came upon a little party of four drinking beer out of the cover of a milk-can in the hallway. They were of the seven good boys and proved their claim to the title by offering him some.”

**Key Points:**

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1. What hardships do tenement dwellers face? What social issues are depicted in these excerpts? (You should be able to name four easily, try to add a couple extra to your list)
2. Why do you think that Riis chose to write so vividly as if he were giving the reader a tour of the tenements for the first excerpt?
3. Based upon the key points you wrote down, please write a brief summary on the conditions of the tenement housing for the families that lived in them.