

An analysis of how the other half lives essay

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The massive overcrowding in New York was epitomized by the tenements, which by 1880 housed over 600, 000 people within 24, 000. This awful statistic was one of many declared by Jacob Riis in his *How The Other Half Lives*. His work, influenced by other tenement reform advocates, synthesized the cause for reform together into this journal to convince those who were blind to the problem to want to also help.

This essay will evaluate the methods and effectiveness of Riis's novel to convince the reader to be moved to help the overcrowding issue in New York. Throughout the journal, Riis plays on the ideals of other reform groups to bring them into this cause. The "problem of the children...makes one feel aghast," (p 135), because most people feel more compelled to help the future of their society. Riis capitalizes on this common morality. Of course, these children had no choice in their living situation. Of course, it was awful that their numbers were so high. Of course, people want to help.

Most, however, don't know how to help, and here Riis was, providing an outlet. Thus, by harnessing human compassion, Riis's propaganda hit right on the mark. He also provided hope for the children, which makes people want to help even more: Even though the "thousand and one charities... one way or another reach the [children]," there is still a need for more. However, the "silver lining" is that "hearts and hands will be found to do it in ever-increasing measure." (all from page 146). Women of the time were still struggling to gain more rights.

Among these rights were equal pay and job opportunities. For the women stuck in low-wage jobs with next to no chance of improving their status, the

tenements were cheap places to live. Riis uses the currently rising feminist movement to appeal for change in this aspect; however, more could be said about women's rights than changing the housing situation, one failure in his novel. Despite this failure, he does a good job of providing justification for why women resort to prostitution. Instead of condemning them like others habitually did, he provided compassion and sympathy, knowing that "starvation had driven them to the one door at which the pride of the American-born girl will not permit her to knock, [as] poverty be the price of her independence. (page 178) Because of this compassion, Riis can gain the support of the female population that would be able to contribute to the reformation of the tenements.

Riis makes a point of appealing to the prohibitionist movement at the time, easily providing countless examples of the evils of alcohol. The number of saloons in the area of the tenements was "easily ten saloons to every church." (page 159) This horrible statistic is easily moving to Christian prohibitionist. Riis mentions these saloons, which "persuade [tenements] that within its doors only is refuge" (page 159), to ignite the spark within Prohibitionists that hate and fear the evils of alcohol. By doing this, he enlists yet another group to help the cause. Riis also set up his book in a way that dragged the readers into the atrocities of the tenement life. How the Other Half Lives provides photographic evidence to give the reader actual image of the lives inside the tenements.

Though ignorance is bliss, these pictures do not allow the imagination to sugar coat the problems. Instead, they force the reader to see the cramped housing, the forlorn children, and utter despair felt by the tenements.

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Because most of the audience would have been Christian, Riis hoped to play into the morality that was assumed to be present in all of them.

The raw power of these photographs also help to promote each point that Riis makes in each chapter. For example, the diagram on page 12 shows how one building could allow absurd numbers of people to reside there by creating tiny rooms, most without light. And, as already mentioned, the numerous pictures of children invoke easy sympathy from the reader, as most people are moved more by wrongs towards children than towards adults. The first several chapters of the book earnestly repeat the inhumane sizes of the tenements. By constantly repeating this, Riis is making sure the reader gets the point. Thus, the reader almost understands their pain because it is forced and ingrained in their mind. This technique is used to hopefully get the readers to act, which was the whole point of him writing the novel. This method was obviously effective, as the results of this publication got the government to respond.

Riis drags out the ventilation measures, seemingly to make the reader understand that this measure was annoying as that section of the book: Though it needed to be done, it was futile in all measures except making the tenant. These measures effectively make the reader immediately see that much more needs to be done to help the empowered inhabitants of New York City. Overall, the book could be considered successful in changing the tenement life. Riis made compelling arguments throughout the journal that went hand-in-hand with other reform efforts at the time. These reformers would then believe that helping to reform the tenements was also promoting their own causes, so hopping on the band wagon only made sense. Riis's <https://assignbuster.com/an-analysis-of-how-the-other-half-lives-essay/>

rhetoric draws the reader in, and he can easily tug on their beliefs and morals to make them see his way. This is apparent in the aftermath of the book's publication, as government action was finally taken to produce healthier, safer living quarters. Jacob Riis pieced together *How The Other Half Lives* to convince others to help the poverty-stricken half of the population.

To a history student, this book provides an in-depth view of the people and events of each specific time period. This book provides a fascinating look into the trials of the "other half" of society, the half that doesn't advance society, but instead provides the foundation for it. This book provides the reality of the romanticized and combustible era of progressivism, which by 1880 housed over 600,000 people within 24,000. This awful statistic was one of many declared by Jacob Riis in his *How The Other Half Lives*. His work, influenced by other tenement reform advocates, synthesized the cause for reform together into this journal to convince those who were blind to the problem to want to also help.

This essay will evaluate the methods and effectiveness of Riis's novel to convince the reader to be moved to help the overcrowding issue in New York. Throughout the journal, Riis plays on the ideals of other reform groups to bring them into this cause. The "problem of the children...makes one feel aghast," (p 135), because most people feel more compelled to help the future of their society.

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