

Jacob Riis and Immigrants

Central Historical Question:

What was life like in American cities during the Industrial Era?

Materials:

- Jacob Riis Photos Powerpoint
- Copies of Jacob Riis Document Set
- Copies of Jacob Riis Guiding Questions

Plan of Instruction:

1. Introduction: *Today, we're going to continue to examine the work of a famous Progressive journalist—Jacob Riis. We are going to continue to use the skill of contextualization to think about the people he photographed and the values and beliefs of the people who bought his books and attended his lectures.*
2. Project 2 photographs: Street Arabs and Gang

Discussion:

- What do you see in these pictures? What do the captions try to explain?
 - Do you think these photographs are trustworthy accounts of what life was like in American cities during the Industrial era? Why or why not?
 - The point here is to establish that these are posed pictures; that, given the technology of the late 19th century, subjects had to sit for minutes at a time to be photographed.
 - Note: Riis photographed the sleeping urchins during the day because he needed the lighting to take the picture.
 - Does the fact that these photographs are posed take away some of their trustworthiness about how poor, urban Americans lived?
 - What do you think Riis wanted to communicate to his audience?
 - What might these photographs tell you about the middle class Americans who bought Riis' books and attended his lectures? What did his audience believe about children? About photographs?
3. Hand out Jacob Riis Documents. Students answer the Guiding Questions.
 4. Whole class discussion:
 - What are his attitudes towards poverty?
 - What are his attitudes towards these immigrants?

- Jacob Riis was someone who thought he was *helping* the immigrants and supporting them. How could he think that if he wrote stuff like this?
- What does this say about his audience? What were their values and beliefs?
- What do these photographs and excerpts tell you about life in cities at the turn of the century?

Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*

The Italian in New York

The Italian comes in at the bottom. In the slums he is welcomed as a tenant who "makes less trouble" than the Irishman: is content to live in a pig-sty and lets the rent collector rob him.

Ordinarily he is easily enough governed by authority—except for Sunday, when he settles down to a game of cards and lets loose all his bad passions. Like the Chinese, the Italian is a born gambler. His soul is in the game from the moment the cards are on the table, and very frequently his knife is in it too before the game is ended.

Chinatown

Red and yellow are the holiday colors of Chinatown, but they do not lend brightness in Mott Street. Rather, the colors only add a general dullness. Whatever happens in Chinatown goes on behind closed doors in stealth and secretiveness. His business, as his domestic life, shuns the light, less because there is anything to conceal than because that is the way of the man. The stranger who enters through the doorway is received with sudden silence, a sullen stare, and an angry "Vat you vant?" that breathes annoyance and distrust.

Jewtown

Poverty always goes along with dirt and disease, and Jewtown is no exception. The diseases these people suffer from are not due to intemperance or immorality, but to ignorance, want of suitable food, and the foul air in which they live and work. The homes of the Hebrew quarter are its workshops also. Every member of the family, from the youngest to the oldest, works, shut in the stuffy rooms, where meals are cooked and clothing washed and dried besides, all day long. It is not unusual to find a dozen persons-- men women, and children--at work in a single small room. It has happened more than once that a child recovering from small-pox, and in the most contagious stage of the disease, has been found crawling among heaps of half-finished clothing that the next day would be offered for sale on the counter of a Broadway store.

Source: Excerpts from Jacob Riis's book *How the Other Half Lives*, 1890. Jacob Riis was a "muckraker" who photographed poverty in New York City's slums in the 1880s.

Jacob Riis Guiding Questions

Name _____

SOURCING: Who wrote this? What type of document is this?

The author's purpose in writing this was . . .

I think the sort of people who read this were. . .

I do/don't trust this document because. . .

CONTEXTUALIZATION

I already know that at this time . . .

From this document I would guess that people at this time. . .

This document might not give me the whole picture because . . .

CLOSE READING

The author is trying to convince the readers that...

The author tries to convince the readers by using the words...