

# “How the Other Half Lives” by Jacob Riis

## Historical Contextualization and Author’s Point of View with your Gale In Context Resources

**Grade Level:** 9-12

**Subject/Content:** U.S. History

**Summary of Lesson:** Students will use *Gale In Context: U.S. History* or *Gale In Context: High School* to read a primary source and then place that source within the proper **Historical Context** and with a **Perspective** and **Point of View**.

**Focus Questions:** What was the purpose of the publication of *How the Other Half Lives*? What was the historical context behind its creation? What was the overall effect of the piece?

**Resource:** *Gale In Context: U.S. History* or *Gale In Context: High School*

**Time Frame:** 45 minutes

**Learning Expectation:** Students will use their close reading skills to analyze a primary source. Students will provide proper historical context and perspective on their primary source using research skills and appropriate sources.

### Assessment Types:

**Informal Assessments:** Students will be assessed informally through the introduction discussion and through debrief discussion through informal questioning

**Formal Assessment:** Students will be assessed formally through a formative assessment of questioning as they read the primary source and research the Gilded Age.

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### Procedures:

#### Steps/Activities by the Teacher:

- Introduce the idea of Historical Context and Point of View with your students.
- Ask students why understanding Historical Context and Point of View is important to understand historical events or primary sources.
- Facilitate a class discussion on how misunderstanding of historical context and Point of View can lead to misrepresentation and misunderstanding of Primary Sources.
- Pass out or digitally distribute copies of the attached worksheet, Historical Context and Point of View with Jacob Riis’s “How the Other Half Lives”.
- (Optional) Send direct links out to the students for the Primary Source and supplemental resources using the **Get Link** tool.
- Allow time for students to read the primary source and research the era of the Gilded Age, paying special attention to the issues brought up by Riis, more specifically the living condition of those in poverty.
- Debrief after the assignment to clear up any lasting questions over the document, the historical context of the Gilded Age, tenement houses, or the assignment. Revisit the focus questions and learning expectations of the lesson.

**Sources:**

Riis, Jacob A. "Jacob A. Riis: Excerpt from *How the Other Half Lives*, 1890." *Gale U.S. History Online Collection*, Gale, 2015. *Gale In Context: U.S. History*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/TMCFMB619717834/UHIC?u=[LOCATION\_ID]&sid=bookmark-UHIC&xid=aa1e3077. Accessed 9 Sept. 2022.

"Tenements." *Gale Encyclopedia of U.S. Economic History*, edited by Thomas Carson and Mary Bonk, Gale, 1999. *Gale In Context: U.S. History*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/EJ1667500685/UHIC?u=[LOCATION\_ID]&sid=bookmark-UHIC&xid=29774aaf. Accessed 22 Sept. 2022.

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**Directions:** Today’s activity focuses on poverty in the Gilded Age through the lens of Jacob Riis and his work, “How the Other Half Lives”. For the first part of the activity, using either *Gale in Context: U.S. History* or *Gale in Context: High School*, search for the primary source document of “How the Other Half Lives” using the search below. Once you have found the document, read the Historical Context part of the article and the sourcing information, and answer the questions below before continuing.



PRIMARY SOURCE: How the Other Half Lives: An 1886 Jacob A. Riis photograph shows men sleeping on the floor of a New York homeless shelter.  
© BETTMANN/CORBIS.



**Basic Search:** How the Other Half Lives and open the Primary Source “How the Other Half Lives (1890)”

**Advanced Search:** Gale Document Number: EJ2164000057

1. When was this written?
2. What type of medium did Riis use?

**Historical Context:** Before diving further in the writing, let us dive into what is happening in the timeframe in which Riis is writing. Using your Gale In Context resource use the search below to find an article over tenement houses to read more about the historical situation at the time. Answer the following questions.



**Basic Search:** Tenements and open the article from Gale Encyclopedia of U.S. Economic History

**Search:** Gale Document Number: EJ1667500685

3. What are tenements?
4. What caused the growth of tenement houses?
5. What kind of problems existed in tenement houses?

**Point of View:** Using what you have now read about the historical context of the United States in during the timeframe, do an in-depth reading of the original document reusing the search below. During this reading, use the author’s point of view, or perspective to find a deeper meaning for the view he was taking.



**U.S. HISTORY**



**HIGH SCHOOL**

**Basic Search:** How the Other Half Lives and open the Primary Source “How the Other Half Lives (1890)”

**Advanced Search:** Gale Document Number: EJ2164000057

6. One of \_\_\_\_\_ who died in New York were buried in Potter’s field (a paupers’ grave).
7. What is the primary concern/issue with the people that Riis sees as needing a help up?
8. What other city is mentioned as having similar issues and results as New York City?
9. How many families have been reported to live in one tenement?
10. Why do you think Riis says a thief is easier to deal with than a pauper?
11. What happened with the beggar woman’s baby?
12. Who does Riis call a hereditary beggar?
13. What does Riis say will happen if they banish the blindman from the streets?
14. **Overall**, what concerns and problems do you think Riis has about poverty in New York City?
15. **Overall**, what solutions do you think Riis will propose to address poverty in the city?

Answer Key:

1. 1890
2. Photography
3. "Tenements (also called tenement houses) are urban dwellings occupied by impoverished families"
4. Growth of immigration that outpaced construction
5. Lack of adequate windows, poor ventilation, disrepair, vermin, lack of proper sanitation
6. 10
7. They need a job
8. Boston
9. 120 families
10. Answers will vary, but Riis implies that there are more solutions of what to do with a thief
11. The baby turned out to be a bundle of rags
12. The Irish or the Celt
13. He will starve
14. Answers will vary but may include: The lack of jobs and adequate living conditions
15. Answer will vary but may include: Government programs, job creation, sanitation law, etc.