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Reading and Response: Industrialization and Gilded Age

Different ideologies and points of view are bound to exist in a country like America, where freedom is the very foundation of its existence. This belief is demonstrated further throughout history, particularly in the case of Andrew Carnegie and Jacob Riis on the state of America in the late nineteenth century. In 1890, Danish immigrant Jacob Riis wrote "How the Other Half Lives," in which he depicted poverty in New York in order to probe the upper class's social consciousness as well as bring to light the struggles those less fortunate face.[[1]](#footnote-1) While five years prior, steel industrialist Andrew Carnegie wrote "The Triumph of America," which is a patriotic article detailing America's and its economy's success as a result of the conditions it grew up in.[[2]](#footnote-2) Carnegie additionally distinguishes America from other countries, particularly the United Kingdom, by asserting that there are "no ranks, no titles, no hereditary dignities, and therefore no classes,"[[3]](#footnote-3) in America, which referenced economic and social classes. Both had quite different viewpoints on the nation's economic status at the time due to their varied backgrounds.

In regard to the preceding notion, each individual had a unique position and experience in America's peculiar economic circumstances, which led to their disparate perspectives. Carnegie often emphasized that equality was ever present and that a social structure was not established in the same manner of aristocracy, so anybody could make it or become wealthy in the same way he did through hard, independent work.[[4]](#footnote-4) While Riis demonstrated the contrary, with those in positions of power, such as Carnegie, constraining others with less money in order to further their agenda of greed.[[5]](#footnote-5) He highlighted this by saying, “We know now that there is no way out; that the “system” that was the evil offspring of public neglect and private greed has come to stay…”[[6]](#footnote-6) While each belief is an individual's perspective, there is one that is fundamentally more correct than the other based on historical data, and that one is Riis. His images of poverty reflected what the majority of people in America were experiencing at the time, with businessmen like Carnegie in the minority, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and emphasizing the lack of mobility.

1. Jacob Riis, “*How the Other Half Lives*,” The American Yawp Reader, 1890, http://www.americanyawp.com/reader/18-industrial-america/jacob-riis-how-the-other-half-lives-1890/, para. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Andrew Carnegie, “The Triumph of America,” The American Yawp Reader, 1885, http://www.americanyawp.com/reader/18-industrial-america/andrew-carnegie-on-the-triumph-of-america-1885/, para. 1-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Carnegie, para. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Carnegie, para. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Riis, para. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Riis, para. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)