Jacob Riis’ How the Other Half Lives

Imogen Cunningham famously stated “for me, photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a split second, of the importance of an event, as well as the exact organization of the shapes giving that event its appropriate expression.” Jacob Riis renowned work, *How the Other Half Lives*, captures the pivotal importance of events paired with a strong, visual, presentation transcribed through ink on paper. During this time, New York City was going through an industrial transformation both economically and socially. While this transformation was happening the new industrial workers were susceptible to poverty yet rarely covered in the mainstream media.

Riis takes us through a journey of the impoverished New York City of the late 1800s addressing what he considered "model tenements.” Riis addressed a variety of issues, with this paper being focused on the city slums, alcoholism in poverty-stricken areas and the inequality of labor amongst women. Riis makes it aware that the newspapers of the time provided an inaccurate representation of the other half.

Foundling Asylum, a Christian organization in New York City, was an unfortunate place to find yourself as one of the "two millions of [sic] people; powerless to prevent it, though it gather in the outcasts by night and by day.” Newspapers in the late 1800s provided “stories of richly-dressed foundlings” of which Riis calls “pure fiction.” As he walked the streets, he was unable to find even a single instance of a well-dressed infant being given up to the Foundling Asylum. Often the parents believed that the desertion of their child was for their good, in one case Riis quoted a woman who wrote on a piece of paper pinned to her child “Take care of Johnny, for God’s sake. I cannot.” With all of the good intention of the parents, they were uninformed of the future these children held. As men and women gave up their children Riis points out “few outcast babies survive their desertion long. Murder is the true name of the mother's crime in eight cases out of ten. Of 508 babies received at the Randall's Island Hospital last year 333 died, 65.55 per cent. But of the 508 only 170 were picked up in the streets, and among these the mortality was much greater, probably nearer ninety percent.” Riis brings in photography, one piece being “In the Sun office, 2 A.M.” This piece demonstrates the sadness of children living in poverty, abandoned alone.

Years prior to prohibition in the United States Riis addressed the stark facts of alcoholism amongst the poor in New York City. Riis brings up the startling fact that saloons outnumbered places of worship over ten to one in poverty-stricken areas of New York. Saloons were often willing to turn a blind-eye when selling to underage individuals. As we know now, addiction can start young — especially when talking about alcohol. The alcoholic is not the only victim of alcoholism; rather the wife and children are the bigger victims. They are subjected to violence, use of funds to buy alcohol and influence their children in an unethical manner. It was common-place to see, as Riis shows through the image “quarters for the night,” of passed out drunk individuals in these saloons.

Poverty was, and still is today, treated as a punishment. The poor were often the ones found in jail, which in turn was a great cost not just for the cyclical cycle of the individual in jail but also economically through the cost to run the facilities. The staggering cost of maintaining our standing army of paupers, criminals, and sick poor, by direct taxation, was [in 1889] $7,156,112.94.” Over 138,332 individuals cycled through their jails and institutions during that year. A high percentage of those individuals in jail were because of alcohol-related reasons. As Las Vegas is known for “what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas” there was an unwritten rule of not talking about the issues that New York City was having outside of the immediate community.

Riis, Jacob. "Wastes of the City's Slums." In *How The Other Half Lives*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1980.