

★ American Literature Readings 3 ★



Imperialism and Progressivism

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 1900s, new and growing industries offered the American people more opportunities than ever before. Under the surface of this growth and prosperity, however, the United States faced serious problems. The cities were growing too fast to maintain decent housing and services for their populations. Few laws regulated working conditions in the factories. Writers began to use their words to expose political corruption and social evils.

When the Great War broke out in Europe in 1914, President Woodrow Wilson asked Americans to remain “neutral in fact as well as in name.” Eventually, neutrality remained impossible. In 1917 American troops entered World War I, one of the bloodiest conflicts in world history.

from *The Battle With the Slum*

Jacob A. Riis

■ About the Selection Jacob A. Riis (1849–1914) immigrated to the United States from Denmark when he was 21 years old. Living in New York City, Riis recognized the cycle of poverty and its effects on the home and community. When he became a newspaper reporter, he drew attention to the fight for social improvement, and his most famous book, *How the Other Half Lives*, actually led to reforms in tenement housing. In *The Battle With the Slum* (1902), Riis warns about the effects of not helping the impoverished.

GUIDED READING

As you read, note how Riis compares the slum to an enemy that must be conquered. Then answer the questions that follow.

The slum is as old as civilization. Civilization implies a race to get ahead. In a race there are usually some who for one cause or another cannot keep up, or are thrust out from among their fellows. They fall behind, and when they have been left far in the rear they lose hope and ambition, and give up. Thenceforward, if left to their own resources, they are the victims, not the masters of their environment; and it is a bad master. They drag one another always farther down. The bad environment

becomes the heredity of the next generation. Then, given the crowd, you have the slum ready-made. The battle with the slum began the day civilization recognized in it her enemy. . . . When a man is drowning, the thing to do is to pull him out of the water; afterward there will be time for talking it over. We go at it the other way in dealing with our social problems. The wise men had their day, and they decided to let bad enough alone; that it was unsafe to interfere with “causes that operate sociologically,”

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as one survivor of these unfittest put it to me. It was a piece of scientific humbug that cost the age which listened to it dear. "Causes that operate sociologically" are the opportunity of the political and every other kind of scamp who trades upon the depravity and helplessness of the slum, and the refuge of the pessimist who is useless in the fight against them. . . .

. . . Having solemnly resolved that all men are created equal and have certain inalienable rights, among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, we shut our eyes and waited for the formula to work. It was as if a man with a cold should take the doctor's prescription to bed with him, expecting it to cure him. The formula was all right, but merely repeating it worked no cure. . . . Our country had grown great and rich; through our ports was poured food for the millions of Europe. But in the back streets multitudes huddled in ignorance and want. The foreign oppressor had been vanquished, the fetters stricken from the black man at home; but his white brother, in his bitter plight, sent up a cry of distress that had in it a distinct note of menace. Political freedom we had won; but the problem of helpless poverty, grown vast with the added off-scourings of the Old World, mocked us, unsolved. . . .

Slow work, yes! But be it ever so slow, the battle has got to be fought, and fought out. For it is one thing or the other: either wipe out the slum, or it wipes out us. Let there be no mistake about this. It cannot be shirked. Shirking means surrender, and surrender means the end of government by the people.

If any one believes this to be needless alarm, let him think a moment. Government by the people must ever rest upon the people's ability to govern themselves, upon their intelligence and public spirit. The slum stands for ignorance, want, unfitness, for mob-rule in the day of wrath. . . .

Put it this way: you cannot let men live like pigs when you need their votes as freemen; it is not safe. You cannot rob a child of its childhood, of its home, its play, its freedom from toil and care, and expect to appeal to the grown-up voter's manhood. The children are our to-morrow, and as we mould them today so will they deal with us then. Therefore that is not safe. Unsafest of all is any thing or deed that strikes at the home, for from the people's home proceeds citizen virtue, and nowhere else does it live. The slum is the enemy of the home. Because of it the chief city of our land came long ago to be called "The Homeless City." When this people comes to be truly called a nation without homes there will no longer be any nation.

Hence, I say, in the battle with the slum we win or we perish. There is no middle way. We shall win, for we are not letting things be the way our fathers did. But it will be a running fight, and it is not going to be won in two years, or in ten, or in twenty. For all that, we must keep on fighting, content if in our time we avert the punishment that waits upon the third and the fourth generation of those who forget the brotherhood.

From *The Battle With the Slum* by Jacob A. Riis. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc.

READER RESPONSE

Directions: Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. According to Riis, how did the rise of civilization lead to slums?
2. What does Riis state will happen if the slums are not wiped out?
3. What do the slums stand for, and how do they threaten democracy?
4. **CRITICAL THINKING** Do you agree or disagree with Riis's opinion of the "wise men [who thought] it was unsafe to interfere with causes that operate sociologically"? Explain your answer.

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UNIT 3

“Over There”

George M. Cohan

❑ **About the Selection** As the United States entered World War I, rousing songs helped bolster the spirits of soldiers and civilians alike. In 1917 composer George M. Cohan (1878–1942) wrote “Over There,” the most popular patriotic song of the war. He also wrote about 20 plays and musicals, greatly shaping the Broadway scene of the era. Cohan was later awarded the Congressional Gold Medal for writing “Over There” and “You’re a Grand Old Flag,” another enthusiastic war song.

GUIDED READING

As you read the lyrics, think about their purpose and how they might have helped the country’s war efforts. Then answer the questions that follow.

Johnnie get your gun, get your gun, get your gun,
 Take it on the run, on the run, on the run;
 Hear them calling you and me;
 Ev’ry son of liberty.
 Hurry right away, no delay, go today,
 Make your daddy glad, to have had such a lad,
 Tell your sweetheart not to pine,
 To be proud her boy’s in line.

CHORUS:
 Over there, over there,
 Send the word, send the word over there,
 That the Yanks are coming,
 The Yanks are coming,
 The drums rum-tumming ev’ry where—
 So prepare, say a pray’r,
 Send the word, send the word to beware,
 We’ll be over, we’re coming over,
 And we won’t come back till it’s over over there.

Johnnie get your gun, get your gun, get your gun,
 Johnnie show the Hun, you’re a son-of-a-gun,

Hoist the flag and let her fly,
 Like true heroes, do or die.
 Pack your little kit, show your grit, do your bit,
 Soldiers to the ranks from the towns and the tanks,
 Make your mother proud of you,
 And to liberty be true.

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READER RESPONSE

Directions: Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Who is “Johnnie” in the song lyrics?
2. According to the song, how will family members feel when Johnnie gets his gun?
3. **CRITICAL THINKING** How does the songwriter imply that American troops will save the day?

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“I Have a Rendezvous with Death”

Alan Seeger

❑ **About the Selection** Poet Alan Seeger (1888–1916) died before any of his poems were published. He was born in New York and was a student at Harvard, graduating in 1910. Seeger moved to France and enlisted in the French Foreign Legion before the United States entered World War I. He was killed at the Battle of the Somme in 1916.

GUIDED READING

As you read, compare the tone of the poem with the patriotic tone of “Over There.” Then answer the questions that follow.

I have a rendezvous with Death
 At some disputed barricade,
 When Spring comes back with rustling shade
 And apple blossoms fill the air—
 I have a rendezvous with Death
 When Spring brings back blue days and fair.

It may be he shall take my hand,
 And lead me into his dark land,
 And close my eyes and quench my breath—
 It may be I shall pass him still.
 I have a rendezvous with Death
 On some scarred slope of battered hill,
 When Spring comes round again this year
 And the first meadow flowers appear.

God knows 'twere better to be deep
 Pillowed in silk and scented down,
 Where Love throbs out in blissful sleep,
 Pulse nigh to pulse, and breath to breath,
 Where hushed awakenings are dear . . .
 But I've a rendezvous with Death
 At midnight in some flaming town,
 When Spring trips north again this year;
 And I to my pledged word am true,
 I shall not fail that rendezvous.

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READER RESPONSE

Directions: Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. What is a rendezvous? What two types of rendezvous does the poet include in the poem?
2. When does the soldier predict his rendezvous with Death will occur? Why is the timing ironic?
3. At what three places does the soldier predict his rendezvous with Death will occur?
4. **CRITICAL THINKING** Compare the tone of this poem with the song lyrics “Over There.” How do they differ?