The Face of the American Dream

There is a cliché saying that goes “a picture is worth a thousand words”. Although the saying is cliché, it still demonstrates that a painting or a photograph can tell a lot about the life that it portrays. From the photo, “Sabbath Eve in a Coal Cellar” by Jacob Riis, and the painting, “Freedom from Want” by Norman Rockwell, one realizes how minorities are left out of the picture when dealing with the American Dream, which can be defined as having a stable family, filling meals, and a warm shelter, but in reality, even people of the minority can achieve better living conditions.

The painting, “Freedom from Want”, depicts a family having a pleasant meal and paints a positive picture for a goal many Americans can aspire for. If the American Dream is to be defined as having a shelter and a hot meal, then this image is its quintessence. However, the picture only shows White Caucasians enjoying the meal on a table covered with white table cloth. One may say that this is due to how it is a family dinner, but this shows the realities of the American Dream, only White Caucasians can achieve a high standard of living. While the painting in of itself does not directly imply the misfortune of the minorities, the overuse of the color white implies the supremacy of the majority of the American population.

“Sabbath Eve in a Coal Cellar” is a photograph of a Jewish man in his cellar room having a dinner. The picture in itself looks depressing compared to the painting, “Freedom from Want”, due to many artistic differences. First of all, the painting is in colors while the photo is in black and white. Even though this is just a technical difference between a photo in the early 19th century and a painting, the lack of color displays the dullness of the Jewish man. Not only does the color contribute to the dullness, but also the facial expression. In the painting, everyone is smiling and conversing with each other, but in the photo, the man gives off a stern stare into the camera. These attributes contribute to an overall feeling of loneliness, which indicates that the Jewish man might not have a family or even if he does, they might be separated by thousands of miles. Next, the Jewish man’s meal consists of one dish, which appears to be some sort of bread, and a can of beer. Compared to the grand feast depicted in the painting, which include turkey, vegetables, fruits, and other variety of food, this meal is a mere appetizer at best. Even though the man has bread on the table, it is not all that filling and he probably has to go to sleep hungry. Not only does this mean the man is not getting all the nutrients that he needs, but the place of meal is not proper. While the family in the painting eats at a dining room, clear of any unnecessary objects, the Jewish man is eating in a room with his hat, firewood, bucket, coat, blanket, and signboard. This indicates that the man probably lives in a one room shelter. Although this man does not seem to have a good life compared to white Americans, he certainly is better off than other Jews living in America.

In the chapter, “Jewtown”, in the book, *How the Other Half Lives* by Jacob Riis, the poor living conditions of immigrant Jews are described. First of all, these immigrants live in a dense environment. Their shelter, which is also their workplace, consists of “dozen persons–men women, and children–at work in a single small room.” Compared to the Jewish man in the photo, at least the man has some breathing space. Also, such crowded rooms meant a hasty spread of diseases, such as smallpox. As for food, Jewish families often bought at “the Pig-market”, which sold a portion of food “at ridiculously low prices.” Although this may seem like a wise shopping technique for people with low budget, the market was largely unregulated and no one knew how the animals were slaughtered to prepare the meat. This meant that many Jewish immigrants ate un-kosher food, which was just as bad as eating molded food to them. As for the Jewish man in the photo, he probably bought the bread from a company shop in the coal mining town, which means that he ate kosher food instead of some shady chicken breast that could have been cut with the same butcher knife that killed a pig. Even though the Jewish man may look poor in the eyes of many Americans, the Jewish immigrants in New York City would probably look up to him.

Although there might be more contrasts than similarities between the photo, “Sabbath Eve in a Coal Cellar”, and the painting, “Freedom from Want”, there still exists the similarity that there is someone in America doing worse. Since the American Dream is one of self-improvement toward a certain goal, a man is living the American Dream if he is doing better off than what he was before despite what the public views him as. American Dream is an essential tool for America’s progress as a nation. The progress of the citizens means the collective progress of the nation itself. A democracy cannot have a few wealthy people advance while having the rest of the population fall behind. A nation where one half of the nation living in wealth while the other half living in poverty is simply not cohesive. For a nation to be truly democratic, all Americans have to advance even if the progress seems little.