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A Focus on Reality: The Development of Social Documentary Photography
and Its Importance for Documentary Literature

Diplomová práce

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Podpis

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Introduction

The thesis provides an overview of the early history of social documentary photography. It traces the field from its beginnings at the end of the nineteenth century to its later development into a fully-fledged documentary genre throughout the first half of the twentieth century. The focus of the thesis is not on the photographs alone. It instead perceives them as social tools and explores social documentary photography through documentary literature that is illustrated or in any other way completed with the addition of photographs.

Photographers who began using photography as a tool for social reform were aware of its value as evidence to the text. The photographs, which were long believed to capture reality accurately and completely, quickly became essential for social documentation. Through an analysis of photographs in relation to language, especially the surrounding text which uncovers or hints at the intentions of the photographer, this thesis aims to demonstrate the techniques photographers used to incorporate the images into their work. The approach of the photographer and his commentary can dramatically influence how one reads what he or she sees. The aim is thus to determine how social documentarists, influenced by the views of the society at that time, as well as their own, used the photographs to shape the readers' perspective to serve the purpose of their work.

The development of photographs into powerful tools of social reform is thus illustrated through the work of Jacob A. Riis, Jack London and the cooperation between James Agee and Walker Evans. Since the early works, photographs were closely tied to the works of social documentation and consequently became inseparable. The selection does not necessarily aim to present the most important works for the development of the studied topic, even though Riis's and Agee and Evans's work represent such works. It aims to demonstrate the development of the documentary genre towards as truthful a depiction of poverty as possible through the variety of approaches of the documentarists. The brief overviews of the periods in which the works were published, as well as a closer look at the authors' lives, provides the reader with sufficient knowledge of the development of social documentary photography and serves as an introduction to the topic. In addition, the thesis illustrates the limitations as well as

the development of photography and printing, explore the conditions and lives of the poor and indicates the views and prejudices of the then society.

Following the introductory chapter that familiarizes the reader with the photography genre and indicates the role of the photographer, the thesis is separated into three parts. The first part describes early development of social documentary photography in the US, focusing on *How the Other Half Lives* by Jacob A. Riis, one of the pioneers of the field. The next part of the thesis focuses on *The People of the Abyss* by Jack London and provides the overview of the affairs of the same period in Europe, especially the United Kingdom. While this work of non-fiction was inspired by the previous work by Riis, among others, the author's approach is in many ways different. Particularly London's approach, which follows the tradition of the previous works of social reporting and yet makes it uniquely personal, lead me to choose his work for this part of the thesis over the works of British and Scottish photographers. His work, which is rarely included as an example of social documentary photography, even though it is worthy of such inclusion, serves as a transition to the personal approach of Agee and Evans. The third part describes the FSA project that proved crucial for the establishment of social documentary photography as a separate documentary genre. The collaboration of the writer James Agee and the photographer Walker Evans known as *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* serves as an example. It illustrates not only the times of the Great Depression, but also the closeness of photography and literature, the image and the word, combination of which proved to be a powerful tool for social reform.

1 Documentary Photography and Photojournalism

From the very beginning of photography, photographs were instruments for recording the reality as it was. Over the decades of its existence, photography served a variety of purposes. During that time, as well as today, not only were photographs not always used as a truthful depiction of reality but the growing opportunities for altering what was captured in postprocessing seriously questioned their reliability. The doubt that surrounds photographs in terms of what and when was captured, who did it and why, for what purpose and whether it was later changed in post processing, is in society much greater nowadays than it was at the turn of the twentieth century. Some of the photography practices, aiming towards objectivity, became standardized and have kept the tradition until today, thus, to some extent, increasing the reliability of the images. Therefore, it is important to define the photography genre I will focus on in this thesis. Tate Gallery defines documentary photography as “a style of photography that provides a straightforward and accurate representation of people, places, objects and events, and is often used in reportage.”¹ As I hope to show in this thesis, to provide “a straightforward and accurate representation” is never as easy as it might seem. However, in this field of photography exist many ethical standards that attempt to avoid any form of manipulation, even the common post-processing practices that are inherent in many today’s types of photography.

To narrow it down, the focus of this thesis is on social documentary photography, which concerns itself with various social issues. Beaumont Newhall, art historian and photographer whose views on documentary photography provide a better understanding of the term as it was perceived in the first half of the twentieth century, writes in his 1938 article that what makes photographs of homes and lives of the underprivileged documentary is whether they were taken “with a seriously sociological purpose.”² It is therefore not only what is captured in the photograph, but also, and mainly, for what purpose is the image taken and later used. As Naomi Rosenblum, an American historian of photography writes, the term “social documentary” “is sometimes used to describe works in which social themes and social goals are paramount, because the word documentary could refer to any photograph whose primary purpose is the truthful

¹ “Documentary Photography,” Tate, accessed January 5, 2018, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/d/documentary-photography>.

² Beaumont Newhall, “Documentary Approach to Photography,” *Parnassus* 10, no. 3 (1938): 5.

depiction of reality.”³ Newhall’s use of the word “documentary” seems to be equal to what will be used as social documentation in this thesis, as opposed to its wider meaning in the field of documentary photography that might, as mentioned, include other interests of documentation, such as historical events or the environment.

Documentary photography is best defined in relation to photojournalism. Both genres, as the thesis illustrates, developed side by side and often overlap, even though they were much harder to distinguish at the period in question than they are nowadays. The main difference is in the time that the photographers spend on the topic in question. Documentary photography “follows a single topic or story in-depth over time, as opposed to photojournalism’s real-time coverage of breaking news and events.”⁴ Indeed, the need for the photographs to be made available to the audience almost immediately might be the crucial factor nowadays. Naturally, due to the lack of today’s technology, it was not necessarily so at the beginning of this field.

Antonin Kratochvil states that the two are “identical mediums but conveying very different messages.” Yet again, the time that photographers can spare seems to be the reason. While documentary photographers “reveal life,” the photojournalist simply does not have enough time to do so. He states that the images in newspapers “show frozen instants taken out of context and put on a stage of the media’s making, then sold as truth.” While “through documentary work, the photographer has a chance to show the interwoven layers of life, the facets of daily existence, and the unfettered emotions of the people who come under the camera’s gaze.”⁵ Documentary photography, commonly accompanied with text, thus provides us with more information and context needed to better understand the subject and tell the story. It also includes more photographs that show us aspects of life which are important to the story but may not need to be crucial for the photojournalist, whose goal is fewer stronger images or even a single photograph. To achieve that, photojournalists often rely on adding “meaning or message to their pictures by employing contrasts and juxtaposition.”⁶ Rosenblum sees another difference between the two, stating that while photojournalism “often

³ Naomi Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1997), 341.

⁴ “Documentary Photography in an Open Society,” Open Society Foundations, last modified October 2013, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/explainers/documentary-photography-open-society>.

⁵ Antonin Kratochvil with Michael Persson, “Photojournalism and Documentary Photography,” *Nieman Reports* 55, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 27.

⁶ *Ibid.*

involved social themes, the images usually were not aimed at social change.”⁷

Nonetheless, the two are linked together through standards that ensure that the images are as truthful a representation of reality as possible. While following the standards is strictly demanded in photojournalism, documentary photographers are expected to follow many of them as well.

1.1 The Ethics of Photojournalism

Photojournalism, as well as documentary photography, represents a photography genre in which it is of the utmost importance to limit any editing of the photos to a minimum or best avoid it altogether. Regarding the advances in photography and post-processing, altering a photograph seems to be much more relevant and easier today than decades ago, it nevertheless was possible at that time as well. Newhall states that “retouching of any kind is strictly prohibited. Since the value of a photo-document lies in the directness of its technique, any intervention of hand-work is bound to be injurious.”⁸ The same belief is held today. The National Press Photographers Association, founded in 1946, has compiled standards of photojournalism into a Code of Ethics, as it believes that visual journalists are responsible for documenting society and thus preserving it for other generations. If manipulated, photographs can “cause great harm.”⁹ It is important to keep in mind that the focus of the thesis is on a period in which these ethical standards did not yet exist.

The Code of Ethics consists of ten standards that are to be followed in all situations and seven recommendations. The standards cover areas such as representing the subjects accurately and comprehensibly, treating them with respect and dignity, resisting staged photos and avoiding alternation of the situation or event. All these standards are crucial for documentary photographers as well. They also forbid the photojournalists from paying their subjects, as well as from receiving money or other gifts that would influence the way they work. The cooperation with other photojournalists is strongly encouraged. Regarding the recommendations, besides avoiding any influence that would question their own journalistic independence, they are encouraged to grow on their personal level and maintain the high standards of their profession. Breaking the standards may result in serious consequences and in losing

⁷ Rosenblum, *World History of Photography*, 342.

⁸ Newhall, “Documentary Approach,” 6.

⁹ “Code of Ethics,” NPPA, accessed January 5, 2018. <https://nppa.org/code-ethics>.

credibility not only of the photographer but also of the journal or any medium in which his or her work was published.

The Code of Ethics focuses specifically on the work of photojournalists. Even though it may seem that they are therefore more faithful to recording exactly what they see and keeping the post-processing to a minimum, it is not always so. In opposition to documentary photographers, they do not have as much time to capture all they might want or need for the story and thus they are more inclined to stage the photograph in the field or alter it later to achieve their goal. The latter might not always be in their control, as the editors might be responsible for such changes. Both cases are not uncommon in the history of photojournalism.

As Todd Hoffman observes, “photojournalism practice has been as influenced by the demands of art and the ability of its pictures to entertain and sell publications as it has been by the needs of historic authenticity.” In the 1930s, even in popular magazines such as *Life* and *National Geographic* appeared pictures that were staged or in which the subjects were somehow manipulated with. The reason being the time pressure to get the desired photograph or a movement of subjects within the photograph so it better fits on the cover.¹⁰ Naturally, that does not mean that documentary photographers always resist the temptation simply because they have more time. It is only one of the factors and in most cases, it is the photographer and his own values and respect for the profession that may or may not prevent them from breaking the ethical standards.

1.2 The Photographer

Although the aim is to represent reality as truthfully as possible, no one would expect two photographers to return with identical photographs, even if they were sent on the same assignment. What they include in the picture and what is excluded may consequently prove important for the interpretation of the reality. It can therefore never be completely objective as long as a person makes decisions behind the camera. For Newhall, a documentary photographer is “a visualizer.” He or she is a person who studies the topic carefully before going on an assignment. Moreover, they examine the material that is accessible about the topic in question, determine what needs to be covered and develop their approach accordingly. They do not just take a picture of what

¹⁰ R. Todd Hoffman, “The Form of Function: Salt Documentary Photography,” in *Maine, a Peopled Landscape: Salt Documentary Photography, 1978 to 1995*, ed. Hugh T. French (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995), 157.

they see. “He puts into pictures what he knows about,” Newhall writes, “and what he thinks of, the subject before his camera.”¹¹ He also mentions the importance of the person’s views and emotions towards the topic and their subjects that are conveyed in the final images. After all, photography is a profession heavily dependent on a person’s personal values and views of the world that they project into the way they tell the story. No matter how objective they attempt to be. All of that should not be considered a weakness of the profession, rather the opposite. Newhall believes that it shows the difference between a visualizer and a person who knows how to use a camera.¹²

1.3 Photographs and Context

A photograph on its own might be interpreted in a completely different way than when a caption is provided. Its interpretation might be similarly changed by the text that surrounds it. Newhall states that for a photograph to be a valid document, it must be “placed in relationship to the beholder’s experience.”¹³ He believes that even an addition of one or two words makes the photograph much stronger. The concreteness of the photograph may be emphasized even with a simple caption with what the subject is and when was the image taken. That gives it a unique point in time and thus makes it valuable as a documentation of that period.

Images that serve the purpose of social reformers and images that can be regarded only as a documentation of the society at a certain period, without any purpose of changing the conditions, may appear to be very similar without any additional information. To separate them, as Rosenblum sees it, “in addition to a particular approach on the part of the photographer, social documentation requires text and context to make its message understood.”¹⁴

Photographs were seldom used on their own when it comes to social documentation. They were regarded as social tools and they had to be perceived as such. It was common to present these images “as lantern slides or as illustrations in pamphlets and periodicals, usually accompanied by explanatory lectures and texts.”¹⁵ Regarding lantern slides as a representation of series of images that serve the same goal, Newhall believes that such use of images is “the richest manner of giving photographs

¹¹ Newhall, “Documentary Approach,” 5.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 6.

¹⁴ Rosenblum, *World History of Photography*, 359.

¹⁵ Ibid., 342.

significance, for each picture reinforces the other.”¹⁶ As these illustrative lectures were accompanied by the photographer’s presence and commentary, his rhetorical strategy was no less important and influential when it came to the way the images were perceived by the audience.

In print, besides the choice of photographs to best represent the story, Newhall believes that in photojournalism, “trimming, quality of reproduction, its relation to text and other reproductions in size and spacing” are as important as the photographer’s work with the camera and in the darkroom.¹⁷ Its role, which will be exemplified in this thesis, may be equally important in social documentation. Reproduction of photographs represents an important issue here, as the focus is on the period in which the appearance of photographs in print was in its early development.

The photographer often conveys his vision in the images and they thus have a social and aesthetic meaning for him. That might be changed by the way the photograph is used. Editors assign and communicate a meaning of the photograph “within a particular rhetorical framework created by its interaction with caption, text, and agency,” Maren Stange states, “even though the photographer and his or her subject did not always intend such a meaning or share its ideology.”¹⁸ For example, the editor of *American Economic Life*, Roy Stryker, used ten Lewis Hine’s photographs as an illustration of a discussion regarding the influences that divide industrial unions. They were originally shot for a different purpose and he cropped them severely so only the faces of the men were visible, appearing as close-up portraits. These were all captioned by nationality, each of them representing a different one. In the layout of the page, these photographs are then placed on the edges of the page around a sketch which is in the center and shows a foundry. In its center, as Stange observes, there is a “massive suspended ladle, full of molten steel” that “refers [...] to the melting pot metaphor.”¹⁹ Even though such occasions are far from being rare, this thesis attempts to focus mainly on the approach of the photographers and their way of using the images.

¹⁶ Newhall, “Documentary Approach,” 6.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), xiv.

¹⁹ Ibid., 103.

2 Early Social Documentary Photography

In the nineteenth century, the primary use of photographs was documentation. Since the first permanent photographic images were taken in the 1820s,²⁰ people used photography to simply record the world around them. The development progressed, and decades later, it was possible to take the photographic equipment away from home. Even though that meant a carriage full of equipment for not only taking the photograph but also developing it, photographic enthusiasts traveled and took pictures of the world, so they could show it to people who could not afford to see the places for themselves.

During the second half of the century, however, photographers slowly started using their images for other purposes as well. While their camera was many times centered at the working class, long exposures and the difficulty of the process meant that these men and women were photographed mostly in the studio and had to stand or sit still. Even though they were portrayed with the tools of their profession, photographers paid little attention to the actual work conditions. Even the travelers returned with pictures that were sometimes focused on famine and other social issues, though they were meant to inform rather than to change the situation. With similar purposes, mainly to record and preserve customs for later generations, people started taking pictures of remote villages in Europe and of the native tribes in the US, often focusing on the positive aspects of their daily lives.²¹

As long as people regarded poverty as a “punishment for sinful behavior,” Rosenblum notes, using camera documentation to improve social conditions would not be effective.²² The changing view, influenced by reformers who started to see the connection between poverty, social behavior of the working class and the environment in which they lived, helped to prepare the ground for social documentation. It also contributed to the establishment and spread of charitable institutions. Many “before” and “after” photographs were taken at that time, proving the effectiveness of such programs. Dr. Thomas John Barnardo was one of the first to do so, though his effort was questioned as the represented change was in many cases only cosmetic. These “before” and “after” images were nevertheless widely used as a social documentation in the 1890s and helped to spread awareness of social problems. Some of them, such as

²⁰ Stange, *Symbols*, 13.

²¹ Rosenblum, *World History of Photography*, 343, 348.

²² *Ibid.*, 352.

the images showing the effectiveness of dealing with starvation in remote countries, proved their worth as a tool for social documentation.²³

At the turn of the twentieth century, social reformers started to use photography as a means of communication of their views.²⁴ Not only the subjects of the photographs but also the intended use thus began to distinguish social documentary photography from other modes of documentation. Its development was closely tied to the advances in printing, mainly the halftone process, as it could not flourish without the possibility to reproduce photographs in print.²⁵ One of the first pioneers of social documentary photography was Jacob A. Riis, who will be used here as a representative of early social documentary photography in the US.

2.1 Jacob A. Riis

Riis was born in 1849 in Denmark. His father had a university education, wrote poetry and contributed editorials to the local newspaper. Riis sometimes helped him with the editorial work. He was encouraged to read English literature which helped him learn the language. His father hoped that Riis would become a writer, he instead as a 15-year-old dropped out of school, unsuccessfully attempted to join the army and was apprenticed to a carpenter—which he became a few years later.²⁶

He emigrated to New York in 1870 and quickly became one among the crowd of poor immigrants. During the first year, he worked various jobs in and outside of the city and attempted to join the army. A year later, he found himself back in New York, starving and considering suicide. The presence of a dog who whined and pressed against him forced him to reconsider his situation. He went to sleep on the floor of the New York Police Lodging Houses. The dog waited outside and when Riis was thrown out for making a scene after his cherished golden locket was stolen, the dog attacked the policeman who ended up killing it. This particular experience greatly influenced Riis's later effort to change the conditions of the slum.²⁷ He left New York, worked as a manual laborer and later became a salesman after an unsuccessful attempt to write for a newspaper. In 1873, his former teacher walked past him in New York where Riis was

²³ Rosenblum, *World History of Photography*, 352.

²⁴ Stange, *Symbols*, xiii.

²⁵ Rosenblum, *World History of Photography*, 341.

²⁶ Janet B. Pascal, *Jacob Riis: Reporter and Reformer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 10–16.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 24–28.

once again among the poor, selling *Hard Times* on the street. He offered him a job as a reporter.²⁸ Riis worked day and night, established a reputation and was later hired as a reporter for the *South Brooklyn News*, a weekly paper. He became an editor after only two weeks and bought the paper a few months later after the owners closed it down. He successfully ran it by himself and later sold it for five times what he had paid for it. He worked as a police reporter for the *New York Tribune* as of 1877.²⁹

He knew the life of the poor and the conditions of the tenements they lived in, so he decided to invest his energy into the improvement of the situation by presenting it to the people of New York. To make his writing more effective, he started using the camera as a tool. His focus was especially on the Lower East Side which was full of immigrants from Europe, living in horrendous conditions. Millions of immigrants came to New York to seek job opportunities. They were regarded as cheap labor, but because of the economic collapse in the 1880s, many of them joined the poorest in the city. Moreover, as Rosenblum states, they were thought to be responsible for their situation by most of the middle-class people. Riis's photographs helped "to prove the truth of his words and to make the relationship between poverty and social behavior clear to influential people."³⁰

He used his photographs as lantern slides that he then presented to the citizens of New York. A magic lantern was an apparatus commonly used for slides at that time, though people mostly used it for showing photographs for entertainment. As Ferenc Szasz and Ralph Bogardus observe, no one else took advantage of the medium to use it for other purposes.³¹ The lantern slides were important for Riis's later success as it was nearly impossible at that time to accurately reproduce photographs in magazines and newspapers and spread them to the masses. Another important factor of his work that brought awareness and resulted in changes in the city was the very fact that he used the photographs to communicate the issues. At that time, people took photographs much more seriously than words as they strongly believed they presented undeniable reality.³² He states in his autobiography that for people, he is a "reporter of facts" and "that [he]

²⁸ Pascal, *Jacob Riis*, 33–38.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 40–41, 48, 58.

³⁰ Rosenblum, *World History of Photography*, 359.

³¹ Ferenc M Szasz and Ralph F. Bogardus, "The Camera and the American Social Conscience: The Documentary Photography of Jacob A. Riis," *New York History* 55, no. 4 (1974): 413.

³² *Ibid.*, 425, 429.

would remain.”³³ Moreover, besides his commentary on the need for change and a necessity to help these people, Riis talked about the situations in which he found himself while taking the pictures, sharing his personal stories and anecdotes³⁴ which connected his serious message with entertainment.

By incorporating “the other half” in the names of his illustrative lectures, as well as in the title of his first book, he assures his audience that they are “this half,” thus, as Stange observes, “assigning to them a relation to the proceedings that offered an attractively secure and collective point of view from which to survey the show.” Furthermore, using a point of view of a tourist helped him to assure the audience’s “privileged position” and thus their right for information “needed to transform or control the slums,” while they kept the distance from horrible experiences and danger that would await them there.³⁵

At the time of his lectures, Riis also helped to spread awareness of the horrors of poverty that can be found in the same city in which the middle and upper-class people lived. Since the working class was kept in industrial sectors, other citizens of New York could have been blind to the reality of these parts of their city.³⁶ That alone added to his success, as the audience were in shock and sometimes reacted to his lectures accordingly. To persuade the audience to join him in his efforts for change, Riis thus created a sense of immediacy which was also helped by the introduction of Tony, a child, as Gregory S. Jackson states, whom many believed to be real and whom they sought to adopt.³⁷ Tony was used to “provoke [the] audience’s empathy and outrage.”³⁸ Once orphaned, once abandoned by his mother, once having fled the home from his drunken father, Riis used Tony in many scenarios, creating stories that helped to exemplify his images by the shocking consequences that were inevitable without any changes made to the actual state of affairs. Riis’s audience identified themselves with the personal tragedy of the subjects of his photographs. Tony’s life, as Riis described it,

³³ Jacob A. Riis, *The Making of an American* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1901), 424.

³⁴ Stange, *Symbols*, 2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 14, 17–18.

³⁶ Christopher Carter, “Writing with Light: Jacob Riis’s Ambivalent Exposures,” *College English* 71, no. 2 (2008): 128.

³⁷ Gregory S. Jackson, “Cultivating Spiritual Sight: Jacob Riis’s Virtual-Tour Narrative and the Visual Modernization of Protestant Homiletics,” *Representations* 83, no. 1 (2003): 158.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

ended many times with his death the reason of which was violence, alcoholism or illness. Rarely did he become a good citizen.³⁹

After the publication of *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*,⁴⁰ which was after three years of his presenting the slideshows, in 1890, Riis was offered help by Theodore Roosevelt which was a beginning of their long-standing friendship and cooperation in making changes in the city.⁴¹ The book was a success and Riis received national reputation. He continued to present the slides not only in New York but also in other cities in America. Until his death in 1914, he focused on social issues and kept writing books, most famous of which are *The Children of the Poor* and *The Battle with the Slum*, as well as many articles for such journals as *Atlantic Monthly*. He also wrote an autobiography, *The Making of an American*. The impact of his visual narratives, as well as his other work, was significant. Due to his effort, the living conditions of the poor improved, new homes were built, relief funds initiated, and labor laws passed. Where the worst tenements once stood, parks, some of which were named after him, are to be found today. All because Riis, to use Jackson's language, "made urban poverty not only visible, but intolerable."⁴²

Riis, as well as other photographers in the late nineteenth century, had to photograph using plates which they developed themselves. They did not have a film camera yet, nor did they have a light meter to properly set the correct exposure. Taking a photograph as well as developing it was thus a difficult process, which was made easier, to Riis's advantage, in 1878 when dry plates appeared on the market, replacing the much more complicated collodion wet plate process. The first paper film camera was introduced by Eastman Company ten years later, in 1888.⁴³ It was also a time of the development of flash powder which allowed the photographers to take pictures inside even during the night, though the process thus also became very dangerous. Riis described his first attempts in his autobiography: "Twice I set fire to the house with the

³⁹ Jackson, "Cultivating Spiritual Sight," 133.

⁴⁰ Hereafter cited as *Other Half*.

⁴¹ Szasz and Bogardus, "The Camera," 422.

⁴² Jackson, "Cultivating Spiritual Sight," 158.

⁴³ Rosenblum, *World History of Photography*, 443.

apparatus, and once to myself. I blew the light into my own eyes on that occasion, and only my spectacles saved me from being blinded for life.”⁴⁴

Regarding his photography skills, Riis writes in his autobiography: “I am downright sorry to confess here that I am no good at all as a photographer, for I would like to be. The thing is a constant marvel to me, and an unending delight.”⁴⁵ It was already stated that Riis used his photographs for the purpose of social reform, it is also important to note that he enjoyed the process of taking pictures. Despite the difficulty of the process, he also showed interest in developing his own photographs: “To watch the picture come out upon the plate that was blank before [...] is a new miracle every time.” His enthusiasm about photography and the enjoyment of staying an amateur could have contributed to his unending motivation and to his primary focus on the social issues, rather than on just capturing the perfect image.

Christopher Carter also observes that his “self-deprecating verbal delivery worked to strengthen his credibility as a photographer by suggesting that he lacked the skill to stage or doctor the scenes in his pictures.” That was not only relevant for the time of the publication of his work, but also for later photographers and critics who found an inspiration or an interest in his work. Carter nevertheless believes that it led to “a popular overestimation of that work’s documentary purity” because of Riis’s attempts to achieve “the [best] telling angle” and thus consequently a better photograph.⁴⁶ As will be demonstrated, many of his images were also carefully posed. However, it seems only natural that as a photographer, he grows with his images and attempts to take them in a way in which they best serve his purpose, even though he considers himself still an amateur. The limitations of photography of that time also contributed to the fact that his documentary work was not always according to the standards mentioned in the first chapter. Not only does that involve the way he took the photographs, but also the way he treated his subjects. I will now take a closer look at both issues while focusing on the images and text in his first and most famous work.

2.2 How the Other Half Lives

Riis created a lecture from the photos he took in the slums of New York and presented it many times under the title “The Other Half: How It Lives and Dies in New

⁴⁴ Riis, *Making*, 271.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁴⁶ Carter, “Writing with Light,” 122.

York.” Among his first audience were people from the Society of Amateur Photographers of New York and from several churches. Soon after the first lecture, it appeared in the *Sun* with wood engravings instead of the photographs. He was asked to write an article for *Scribner’s* and a week after its publication in 1889, he was asked by an editor of the *Critic* to write a whole book. The book was published a year later, and it was a huge success.⁴⁷ Since the reproduction of photographs was very difficult at the time of publication, more than half of the photographs were presented as woodcuts. The actual photographs were added in later editions.⁴⁸

The focus of *Other Half*, as well as his work in general, is on the living conditions in the tenements. Besides usual overcrowding, he describes dark places and rooms without windows for which the tenants pay more than would be acceptable and some of which are so small he could not even take a picture of them, as well as filth, hot air and stench which even dogs choose to avoid, and diseases that spread easily in such places. The darkness, heat, and lack of fresh air seem to be, as Riis sees it, responsible for taking away any chances for a person with an infectious disease, usually a child, to survive.⁴⁹

The text is filled with cases of insanity, murder and suicide that are the consequences of the living conditions, as well as of financial inability to take care of the family, which is in most cases caused by low wages and high rents. He illustrates the states of minds to which these conditions can lead, stating cases of mothers who kill themselves or murder their children. On the other side, he describes cases of dying babies whose mothers are in distress not because they are about to lose their child but because they cannot afford to pay for the funeral.⁵⁰ While he also discusses working conditions, language barriers, legislation, laziness and other reasons that influence the fate of the poor, the tenements seem to be the problem that could solve it all. To exemplify, he calls them “the hot-beds of the epidemics,” “the nurseries of pauperism and crime,” and as their worst crime he states that “they touch the family

⁴⁷ Szasz and Bogardus, “The Camera,” 421–422.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 428.

⁴⁹ Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1890), 44, 65.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 258.

life with deadly moral contagion.”⁵¹ They are blamed for nearly all the problems discussed and the text, as much as the photographs, is designed to prove it.

Riis’s photographs themselves were always accompanied by text or at least a commentary. They hardly ever stood alone. In the book specifically, only one photograph is not incorporated in the text, as it invites the reader at the very beginning of the book. It is understandable, though, since they were used as a tool for expressing his ideology. Even when presented during the illustrative lectures, his commentary, as Stange states, “identified and named, or captioned, individual images, directing viewers to assign them specific meanings consonant with Riis’s larger text.”⁵² The same applies to photographs included in his works. The photograph called “The Tramp” (fig. 2.1), showing a man sitting on a ladder with his pipe in a yard, represents such an example.

The caption makes it certain that the reader is looking at one of the group of people he writes about in that chapter. Only from the surrounding text that provides Riis’s views about the tramps and his personal experience with this man, one forms an opinion about him and the image itself. Riis tells us that anybody can become a tramp and once they do, “the man keeps to [the career] because it is the laziest.” He adds that their doctrine is “that the world owes them a living.” He also mentions that the men “take to the railroad track and to camping out when the nights grow warm, returning in the fall to prey on the city and to recruit their ranks from the lazy, the shiftless, and the unfortunate.”⁵³ The reader thus forms an opinion about the group of which a representative is in the picture.

⁵¹ Riis, *Other Half*, 3.

⁵² Stange, *Symbols*, 12.

⁵³ Riis, *Other Half*, 77.



Figure 2.1. Jacob A. Riis, *The Tramp*, c. 1890. Museum of the City of New York.

The addition of his own experience with this tramp shapes the reader's perception of the picture even more, as well as provides a detailed view of the group in general. Riis describes him as "a particularly ragged and disreputable tramp" to whom he offered ten cents for the picture. When Riis got ready to take the picture, the tramp hid his pipe, only to undo so when he was paid an extra quarter by Riis.⁵⁴ The presence of the image then serves as a proof of his story and makes the message of the surrounding text authentic and believable. As was usual with Riis's subjects, the tramp served as an illustration of the group that Riis stereotyped. Other than the tramp's reaction to his photographing, Riis does not provide, nor did he perhaps cared enough to acquire, any information about his personal history.

⁵⁴ Riis, *Other Half*, 78, 80.

Another image from the book, “A Growler Gang in Session,” (fig. 2.2) represents a similar example.



Figure 2.2. Jacob A. Riis, *A Growler Gang in Session*, c. 1890. Museum of the City of New York.

Since in the surrounding text, Riis discusses the gangs and all the crimes they are responsible for in the neighborhood, the reader is forced to view the boys in the picture in a certain way. Like the tramp, the gang in the image serves as a sample, illustrating a typical group of young criminals. Once again, he does not seem to be interested in any personal stories. He attempts to pose the boys to his liking, stating that he “threw a vague suggestion of cigarette-pictures, and it took root at once.”⁵⁵ Even though in the surrounding text he mentions serious crimes that the gangs commit, he describes this

⁵⁵ Riis, *Other Half*, 222.

moment with humor as a pleasant encounter, stating that they “[dragged] a disreputable-looking sheep that roamed around with them” to be a part of the group, calling one of the boys “the homeliest ruffian” and mentioning that they even showed him his tricks.⁵⁶

When he is finished with the story of the picture, Riis mentions that the gang robbed a Jew who passed them, not more than half an hour later, and attempted to saw his head off for fun. “Lest any reader be led into the error of supposing them to have been harmless young fellows enjoying themselves in peace.”⁵⁷ Not only did he thus ensure that the gang would be seen as a representative and not as an exception of the group he describes in that chapter, he also proves the reader that his commentary is as much important for the right interpretation of the reality as is the image itself.

Some of Riis’s subjects appear to be asked to pose in a way that changes the actual situation in front of him, such examples are images of boys posed in sleep in streets of New York.⁵⁸ Due to a long exposure, which was needed outdoor in low-light situations, the subjects had to be posed. As Szasz and Bogardus observe, “he [thus] ‘arranged’ reality as much as he ‘represented’ it.”⁵⁹ Some of the photographs were clearly arranged more than others. They believe, as do other critics of Riis’s work, that some of his strongest images were carefully posed, stating an image called “In the Home of an Italian Ragpicker, Jersey Street” (fig. 2.3) as one of them.⁶⁰

The surrounding text of the photograph mentions Italian immigrants, rag-pickers, who were “sorting out the bones, rags, tin cans and other waste,” while men who were responsible for it had already picked anything worth having, then allowed the Italians to “do the heavy work for them, letting them have their pick of the loads for their trouble.”⁶¹ While the text does not mention the woman in the picture, it helps to emphasize the environment she lives and is photographed in, as well as the contrast between the room and her posture.

⁵⁶ Riis, *Other Half*, 222.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁵⁸ Jackson, “Cultivating Spiritual Sight,” 153.

⁵⁹ Szasz and Bogardus, “The Camera,” 417.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 419.

⁶¹ Riis, *Other Half*, 50.



Figure 2.3. Jacob A. Riis, *In the home of an Italian Ragpicker, Jersey Street.*, c. 1890. Museum of the City of New York.

As Rosenblum sees it, reformers knew that their photographs would be used to persuade their audience and so they attempted to best “communicate a belief that slum dwellers were capable of human emotions and that they were being kept from fully realizing their human qualities by their surroundings.” She adds that through expressions and gestures, they aim to win the audience’s sympathy, “[transforming] a mundane record of what exists into a fervent plea for what might be.”⁶² The Italian woman does surely represent such an idea. Riis was deeply religious himself and as David Morgan believes, his audience could not easily ignore the conditions of the poor illustrated in Riis’s photographs “without violating the fundamental moral commitments of their faith.”⁶³ The heavenward gaze of the mother, emphasized by the low angle of the camera, and her position while she holds the baby lead people, Szasz and Bogardus among them,⁶⁴ to rename the photograph “Madonna and Child.” A few other symbols found in the photograph, such as the ladder leading to the same direction of her gaze,

⁶² Rosenblum, *World History of Photography*, 361.

⁶³ David Morgan, *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 155.

⁶⁴ Szasz and Bogardus, “The Camera,” 420.

which also symbolizes that there is an opportunity to escape these conditions, or the hat resembling a halo above her head, almost undeniably leads to a spiritual interpretation of the photograph. Such images were important for the changing view of poverty “as the result of either biology or moral stigma rather than environment.”⁶⁵

Riis cooperated with other amateur photographers, especially before he acquired his own camera, which was not earlier than January 1888.⁶⁶ Richard Hoe Lawrence was one of the photographers and, in contrast to others who helped Riis, a collection of his photographs was preserved. Regarding “The Tramp,” Stange mentions that the image, as well as other thirty photographs, are, besides occasional differences in cropping, exact duplicates of images in Lawrence’s collection.⁶⁷ Riis was often accompanied by these photographers on his visits to the slums. Lawrence, as well as others, is mentioned on such occasions in his autobiography.⁶⁸ With the issue regarding the authorship of some of his photographs comes another, a question of who is considered the author, a man who takes the picture, or a man who is in control of the subject and the scene that is photographed? For it seems that for Riis, the latter might be crucial. In his autobiography, before he had a camera, he states that he hired professional photographers when he could not convince his friends to accompany him on his visits during the night. While he mentions the services of a photographer to whom he paid a good amount of money to accompany him, he writes: “He repaid me by trying to sell my photographs behind my back.”⁶⁹ By calling them “my photographs,” even though he was not the one to take the pictures, it can be assumed that crediting other photographers for their work, possibly including his friends, was not important for him. At least not in such cases when he was in control of the scene that was being photographed.

Stange states that policemen were using photographs regularly to help them with controlling the city and possible criminal activities. Because of the photographs, being used mainly to register and identify potential criminals, people were reluctant to have their pictures taken in case they would be used for similar purposes.⁷⁰ Riis also used the camera as a means of surveillance. His work as a police reporter is reflected in the book.

⁶⁵ Jackson, “Cultivating Spiritual Sight,” 134.

⁶⁶ Stange, *Symbols*, 8.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁸ Riis, *Making*, 268.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁷⁰ Stange, *Symbols*, 22–23.

He is heavily dependent on stories from police reports and his work and uses police statistics throughout the book. From the personal stories and experiences included, it is evident that he was in many cases accompanied by the police. Regarding one of these evening adventures, when he was also accompanied by other photographers, he writes that “the police went along from curiosity; sometimes for protection. For that they were hardly needed.” He remarks that to take photographs during the night, they needed flashlights which were fired from pistols at that time. One can then assume that in some cases, having policemen around was more of a complication for his work, rather than an assurance of safety which he did not perceive as necessary. On such visits with several people with pistols, as he states, “it was not to be wondered at if the tenants bolted through windows and down fire-escapes wherever we went.” His feeling of safety was emphasized by the fact that people regarded him as a doctor. People knew that they might need them at some point and therefore, “doctors [were] never molested in the slum.”⁷¹

The reason for photographing the tenements at night, as Carter sees it, was “to be certain that he caught the tenements at their worst.”⁷² Riis knew very well that during the night there were a lot of people sleeping inside illegally. He provides evidence for that statement several times throughout the book. On one occasion, they counted a hundred and fifty people “sleeping on filthy floors in two buildings.”⁷³ At another time, they entered a room “not thirteen feet either way [in which] slept twelve men and women, two or three in bunks set in a sort of alcove, the rest on the floor.” Riis seemed to be accustomed to such occasions, adding that there was a lamp in the room “probably to guide later arrivals [...] for it was just past midnight.” They did sleep there illegally but not due to the solidarity of the landlord and thus not without a fee. “Most of the men were lodgers, who slept there for five cents a spot.”⁷⁴ Many people were prepared for such visits and ensured that the lodgers disappeared before an inspection could intervene. To ensure that he would find the actual conditions of the tenements, James Curtis notes, he made a deal with the owner, allowing Riis to enter the building for promising not to prosecute him for illegal lodging.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Riis, *Making*, 268, 237.

⁷² Carter, “Writing with Light,” 124.

⁷³ Riis, *Other Half*, 19.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 68, 70.

⁷⁵ James Curtis, “Making Sense of Documentary Photography,” *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web* (June 2003), 10. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/photos/>.

To get the images that illustrate the problems of the tenements, Riis and his companions chose their goal of changing the states of things over the dignity of their subjects. He came to photograph them during the night when they were asleep. As indicated above, he also frightened many during his visits as they thought he might be there for an inspection. As he enters the room, he photographs the people, who were asleep just a few minutes ago, using powerful flashlights.



Figure 2.4. Jacob A. Riis, *Lodgers in a crowded Bayard Street tenement – “Five cents a spot,”* c. 1890. Museum of the City of New York.

The photograph of one of the rooms, called “Lodgers in a Crowded Bayard Street Tenement—‘Five cents a spot.,’”⁷⁶ (fig. 2.4) which appeared as a wood engraving in the earliest editions of the book, shows six faces of people under blankets and others who seem to be still asleep or hiding, possibly from the camera or the light that was used to illuminate the room. Because of the limits of his photographic equipment, as Curtis states, he had to also “command his subjects to be still”⁷⁷ so he could take the photographs without them being blurry. The people whose bodies are visible seem, as Carter observes, to “sleep sitting up and fully clothed, heightening the sense of

⁷⁶ Riis, *Other Half*, 69.

⁷⁷ Curtis, “Making Sense,” 10.

impossibly tight quarters while indicating readiness to flee.”⁷⁸ Sleeping in such positions was not uncommon among the poor. A pub, whose customers were “the professional tramps, and these only,” provided an all-night access for two cents. One of Riis’s photographs shows men sitting on chairs while sleeping on the table. Those who could not pay the admission fee could have been found sleeping in the squat position in rows in hallways of the worst tenements.⁷⁹ The flash powder was not only the reason for the “startled expressions” of Riis’s subjects in the image above, but it was also powerful enough to exaggerate the actual appearance of the room.⁸⁰

He believed that photographs were a necessary tool in his efforts as the worst tenements did not necessarily look bad, comparing them to an apple with “a fair skin and a rotten core.”⁸¹ His photographs as evidence were not only used to persuade the public. When he submitted a report to the Health Board the day after his visit during which the photograph was taken, “it did not make much of an impression [...] until [his] negatives, still dripping from the dark-room, came to reenforce them. From them there was no appeal.”⁸²

Riis states that a single inspector was supposed to ensure that companies in New York, the number of which was approximately twelve thousand, do not employ children.⁸³ In his autobiography, he mentions his solution to the problem. He knew the girls that worked there were under fourteen, but their certificates said otherwise, as did the girls. No birth records were available and so he acquired a chart from his friend, a doctor, showing the relation between the growth of certain teeth and the person’s approximate age. “Armed with that [he] went into the factories and pried open the little workers’ mouths.” Even though he states that “the girls objected,”⁸⁴ as they might have understood that the money was needed in the family. While to some, it might seem like a creative solution to a problem of child labor, Susan Ryan, one of the critics of his approach, calls this “one of the most invasive of his reformist practices” and condemns it, stating that his “nocturnal raids and bodily inspections defy elements of the United States’ legal code that guarantee freedom from unauthorized and unreasonable searches,

⁷⁸ Carter, “Writing with Light,” 125.

⁷⁹ Riis, *Other Half*, 76–77.

⁸⁰ Curtis, “Making Sense,” 10.

⁸¹ Riis, *Other Half*, 264.

⁸² Riis, *Making*, 273.

⁸³ Riis, *Other Half*, 237.

⁸⁴ Riis, *Making*, 310.

and that protect individuals from being compelled to give testimony against themselves.”⁸⁵ She did not appreciate the outcome either, as she states that the solution would last only a few years. Riis commented on his approach following this particular situation thus: “Rough ways and rough work? Yes, but you must use the tools that come to hand, and be glad for them, if you want to get things done. Bludgeons were needed just then, and, after all, you can get a good deal of fun out of one when it is needed. I know I did.”⁸⁶ This case is what made Carter side with Ryan, both of whom seem to not only dislike his way of dealing with the situation at hand but also, and mainly, emphasize that he got “a good deal of fun” out of it.⁸⁷ Ryan goes further saying that by his views expressed in his work, he “admits his enjoyment of violence” and by justifying his actions, his fighting poverty actually changed into “a war on the poor.”⁸⁸

As stated above, Riis perceived his subjects as representatives of certain groups, rather than individuals. Riis devoted each of the main ethnic groups of immigrants, Italians, Jews, Chinese and Bohemians, a separate chapter, focusing on their distinct character traits and habits. Besides his own views based on his personal experience, he mostly projects the society’s prejudices at his time into his own perception of the immigrants. Despite his own immigrant background, he does not take their views into account and does not, except for rare occasions in the book where he mostly retells stories from other sources, consider it important enough to include it into his strategy of spreading awareness about their lives.⁸⁹ Nor does he pay any particular attention to his subjects’ unique life experiences. Moreover, he stereotypes them and labels them according to their supposed behavior and appearance. Describing Jewtown, he writes that “the jargon of the street, the signs of the sidewalk, the manner and dress of the people, their unmistakable physiognomy, betray their race at every step.”⁹⁰ As Ryan observes, by turning the subjects’ lives into “anecdotes, into frozen tableaux of suffering or dissipation,” he disregards “the context of his subject’s personal history, self-perception, and consciousness.”⁹¹ She states that she does not have any doubt that his effort was in the benefit of the poor, or at least that he believed that he does it for

⁸⁵ Susan M. Ryan, “‘Rough Ways and Rough Work’: Jacob Riis, Social Reform, and the Rhetoric of Benevolent Violence,” *American Transcendental Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (1997): 205.

⁸⁶ Riis, *Making*, 310–11.

⁸⁷ Carter, “Writing with Light,” 126.

⁸⁸ Ryan, “Rough Ways,” 193.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 208, 202.

⁹⁰ Riis, *Other Half*, 104.

⁹¹ Ryan, “Rough Ways,” 200.

the poor, and she herself acknowledges that “his attitudes toward those he sought to help [...] were to a large extent informed by widespread beliefs in racial and class hierarchies, and in the efficacy of military-style problem solving.”⁹²

Riis states his vision at the beginning of the book thus: “The remedy that shall be an effective answer to the coming appeal for justice must proceed from the public conscience. Neither legislation nor charity can cover the ground. The greed of capital that wrought the evil must itself undo it, as far as it can now be undone.” His primary focus on the middle class is apparent as he believes that homes should be provided for the poor by their employers and that philanthropy and landlords who are fair to their tenants and keep their profit at five percent are the solutions to the problem. At the very end of the book he warns his readers against a possible revolt, stating that the gap between them and “the sea of a mighty population [...] [that] heaves uneasily in the tenements” is widening and there is only one way to close it: “I know of but one bridge that will carry us over safe, a bridge founded upon justice and built of human hearts.”⁹³

Ryan nevertheless criticizes his goals, which are mainly focused on improving the conditions of the poor by destroying the worst of the tenements, for, as she believes, he does not take into account the lives of the people he thus plans to make homeless, nor does he propose any other solution for their alternative housing.⁹⁴ Riis clearly prefers action to discussions when he states, regarding the demolition of the worst of the tenements described in the book, that he “had no stomach for abstract discussions of social wrongs,” he only wanted “to tear down the Mulberry Bend and let in the light.” The Mulberry Bend Park, which was established after the demolition, is praised by Riis who appreciates the change and the peace that replaced the chaos of the tenement, summarizing in his autobiography that “the place that had been redolent of crime and murder became the most orderly in the city” because “the sunlight was let in.”⁹⁵ Ryan describes the park as a “sort of recreational fishbowl” and stresses that the calm of the park was achieved simply by not giving the criminals places to hide.⁹⁶ Riis attributes his beginning of “[growing] stout” to the tearing down of the tenements, stating that he directly or indirectly helped to tear down seven blocks of them, “[wishing] it had been

⁹² Ryan, “Rough Ways,” 194.

⁹³ Riis, *Other Half*, 4, 296.

⁹⁴ Ryan, “Rough Ways,” 198.

⁹⁵ Riis, *Making*, 370, 282–83.

⁹⁶ Ryan, “Rough Ways,” 200.

seventy.”⁹⁷ Even though he indeed does not mention anything about the alternative housing, he seems to assume that that will be provided by new tenement buildings. At the beginning of the book, Riis states that “the worst houses exercise a levelling influence upon all the rest” and similarly, at the end, he states that “a single good tenement has the power to change, gradually but surely, the character of the whole block.”⁹⁸

None of Riis’s other books achieved such popularity as *Other Half*, even though, as he mentions, critics appreciated the next book even more. Riis claims he could not even explain it to himself, suggesting that the title itself was very helpful.⁹⁹ Nonetheless, as Rosenblum observes, the book set the norm for other works dealing with social problems and even though the text “might still consider poverty to be the result of moral inadequacy rather than economic laws,” it was expected that the evidence would be provided in a form of photographs.¹⁰⁰

2.3 New York at the Turn of the Century

Jacob Riis was not the only one to take interest in bettering the conditions of the tenements in New York. For that, and for the formation of social documentary photography, an event held in 1900 was equally important. Charity Organization Society sponsored the Tenement House Exhibition which showed more than a thousand photographs of life in the tenement buildings. During the exhibition, Lawrence Veiller proposed many changes that included the requirement of more windows and doors in existing tenements, as well as sanitary and fireproof measures. The exhibition was successful and after all his measures were passed by the state’s legislature in 1901, he became the deputy commissioner of the new Tenement House Department, which was also established following his proposal.¹⁰¹

The slums with all the issues mentioned above were hardly a concern of only the City of New York. To compare the conditions, as well as the development of social documentation outside the US, I will now look at the situation in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century.

⁹⁷ Riis, *Making*, 349.

⁹⁸ Riis, *Other Half*, 17, 296.

⁹⁹ Riis, *Making*, 309.

¹⁰⁰ Rosenblum, *World History of Photography*, 361.

¹⁰¹ Stange, *Symbols*, 28–29, 32.

3 Europe at the Turn of the Century

The focus of documentary photographers at the end of the nineteenth century was on recording customs that they believed would not be preserved with the spread of urbanization. One such photographer was Sir Benjamin Stone, who, mainly in the 1880s, took photographs not only in Britain, and advocated the establishment of photographic surveys in museums and libraries. That was later realized by Francis Greenwood Peabody who established a museum that housed more than 10 000 documents of social experiences around the world, including photographs.¹⁰²

While Jacob Riis was one of the first to give an account of the poor in a book form with photographs in America, such works already existed in the UK. In 1850 appeared Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and London Poor*. The images could only appear as wood engravings at that time which meant that the illustrations were far from the original photographs, especially when it comes to showing the environment in which the people lived. Nevertheless, the accounts of the people often represented through authentic first-hand interviews greatly influenced later works of social documentation.¹⁰³

In 1877, a work that followed the tradition of Mayhew's observations appeared, *Street Life in London*. The author was Adolphe Smith who collaborated with the photographer John Thompson. The Woodburytypes used in this work meant that the images could have been reproduced in good quality without the necessity of engravings. The weakness of this work, however, as Rosenblum believes, can be found in the text. To make the middle class more sympathetic, the author often ameliorated the reality of the conditions of the poor, making the text "mixture of sensationalist reporting and moralistic opinions." Nonetheless, the book succeeded in one of its goals when an embankment was built to save the houses of the poor from frequent flooding.¹⁰⁴

The book included 36 Thompson's images, each of which was accompanied by an essay by Smith. The quality of reproduction, as well as the esthetic quality of the images taken by Thompson, were what the previous work by Mayhew lacked. They depict the inhabitants of London, in several professions on the street, and include

¹⁰² Rosenblum, *World History of Photography*, 351.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 357.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 357–58.

enough space to show the environment they live in. Unlike Riis's photographs, however, they mostly present good-looking people and scenes that do not aim to shock the viewers. For the purpose of this thesis, it is important to note that the authors of *Street Life in London*, as did later Riis, assured the readers of the undeniable power of the photographs in capturing nothing but truthful reality. That they did at the very beginning, in the preface of the book:

And now we also have sought to portray these harder phases of life, bringing to bear the precision of photography in illustration of our subject. The unquestionable accuracy of this testimony will enable us to present true types of the London Poor and shield us from the accusation of either underrating or exaggerating individual peculiarities of appearance.¹⁰⁵

The “unquestionable accuracy” of photographs thus give the reader no chance to even consider that the reality the camera captures might have been somehow altered by the photographer. To those who dare to question it, the “shield” would prove otherwise. Although, as Gail Buckland observes, these early social documentary photographs “possess a kind of innocence and lack of pretention” which is in sharp contrast to “the sophistication and cunning” of propaganda photographs in the second half of the twentieth century.¹⁰⁶

Another work important for the development of social documentation that concerned itself with the slums of Glasgow and its inhabitants, *Old Closets and Streets of Glasgow*, was published a year later. The purpose of the Thomas Annan's book, however, was to document the old city that was believed to be vanishing, rather than to use his reporting as a tool for social reform.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, his compelling photographs that document the conditions in which the poor lived, even though many of them do not have people in them, lead Buckland to perceive his work as “an outstanding example of the use of the camera as a social weapon.”¹⁰⁸ Several other works of social reporting were published at the end of the nineteenth century that did not use photographs as illustrations.

¹⁰⁵ Adolphe Smith and John Thompson, *Street Life in London* (1877; repr., New York: Benjamin Bloom, 1969): 6.

¹⁰⁶ Gail Buckland, *Reality Recorded: Early Documentary Photography* (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1974): 77.

¹⁰⁷ Rosenblum, *World History of Photography*, 358.

¹⁰⁸ Buckland, *Reality Recorded*, 79.

3.1 Jack London

While fiction was what made Jack London famous, he was also a photographer. He used his skills to produce photographs that appeared several times as illustrations to his texts. He acknowledged that his images were to be valued on their own and were not to be perceived only as inessential illustrations. Partly also to earn more money, he thus demanded a financial reward for his photographs separate from the value of his prose. To secure his payment, as J. Campbell Reesman, Sara S. Hodson and Philip Adam, who studied London's photographs, observe, he often argued the cost of the photographic process, rather than the artistic value of his photographs. Nevertheless, he considered himself a good photographer and argued for the added value with which the images, taken by himself as an author of the prose, contributed to his work.¹⁰⁹

London learned photography from his former schoolmate Fred Jacobs and his fiancée, Bessie May Maddern. After Jacobs's death in 1898, Maddern became London's first wife. She was interested in photography herself and London became accustomed to having a camera with him. He was not only a prolific writer. Between the years of 1900 and 1916, he produced more than twelve thousand photographs.¹¹⁰ London's success enabled him to use the newest gear available. He mostly used his Kodak compact folding cameras, which required roll films. The technical advances at the time of his beginning with photography facilitated the use of the camera during his travels, especially smaller, portable cameras and faster films and lenses. Taking a usable image and correctly developing it was, nevertheless, still a difficult process. Adam admires London's skill at both, considering the extreme weather conditions during his travels.¹¹¹ London also benefitted from the development of publishing. Magazines were able to print larger photographs in a better quality and distribute them to the masses. His images and stories from Korea, as well as photographs of him with stories, such as those announcing his arrest and subsequent release, appeared in many significant newspapers.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Jeanne Campbell Reesman, Sara S. Hodson and Philip Adam, *Jack London, Photographer* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 163–65.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12, xiv.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 261.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 62.

His first noteworthy photographs are those included in *The People of the Abyss*.¹¹³ Among his following most important work are portraits of refugees, soldiers and officers from Korea during the Russo-Japanese war, photographs of the aftermath of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, collection of photographs of people from various nations taken during the round-the-world voyage on London's yacht, the Snark, as well as images of the Mexican Revolution in 1914.

London's life-long motivation was to earn enough money that would ensure that he gradually improved his financial situation and enabled him to maintain a certain lifestyle different from his earlier life experiences. Even as a child, when he was not at school, he would carry newspapers, sweep saloons and work on an ice wagon to contribute to the family's income. He would not be allowed to keep what he earned and would not see any benefits from his hard work.¹¹⁴ Later in life, his hard labor earned him just enough to get by. Seeing the consequences of this life on his father, who were desperate to find any work to earn money for the family, he became, to use Rebecca Steffoff's language, "dismayed and disgusted by a world in which the owners of industries grew wealthy while workers slaved away in conditions that broke their spirits and bodies."¹¹⁵

Mainly seeking adventure, at 18 he joined Jacob Coxey's mass march from Ohio to Washington to support the unemployed. The "army" ended up starving before they reached their goal and London, who could not stand it, left them and headed to Chicago. He then spent several months living as a tramp and experiencing the life of the homeless. He was arrested for vagrancy and without any opportunity to defend himself was sentenced to 30 days in prison. The horrid conditions and the injustice he felt "helped fuel his belief that the country's political, economic, and social systems needed overhauling."¹¹⁶

London was an advocate of socialism which for him represented a better distribution of wealth and power. He joined the Socialist Labor Party in 1896 and stayed there until 1916. He was a spokesman for socialism, gave speeches in parks and published letters in newspapers. He continued giving speeches on various occasions,

¹¹³ Hereafter cited as *Abyss*.

¹¹⁴ Rebecca Steffoff, *Jack London: An American Original* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 22.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

became a president of a socialist club in San Francisco and in 1905, as a candidate of Socialist Party, became a mayor of Oakland.¹¹⁷ He believed that socialism would be beneficial to everybody and could eliminate poverty. In his speech from 1905, three years after his experience in London described in *Abyss*, he wrote:

With the natural resources of the world, the machinery already invented, a rational organization of production and distribution, and an equally rational elimination of waste, the able-bodied workers would not have to labor more than two or three hours per day to feed everybody, clothe everybody, house everybody, educate everybody, and give a fair measure of little luxuries to everybody. There would be [...] no more men and women and babes living like beasts and dying like beasts. The spiritual, intellectual, and artistic uplift consequent upon such a condition of society would be tremendous.¹¹⁸

His daughter, Joan London, in her biography of London also states that according to him, the mass needs to “be ruled by the few” who are wise and fit to lead.¹¹⁹ William E. Cain states that for London, socialism “signals battle, violence, and, for the best men, intoxicating opportunities for leadership.” When he fought for a fairer distribution of wealth and power among people, he had the Anglo-Saxon race in mind. Cain believes that while in his fiction and non-fiction it is not very evident, London’s racism is best seen in his letters that “show that London perceived socialism as for whites only.”¹²⁰ In his correspondence with Cloudesley Johns, he often mentions the importance of the Anglo-Saxon race. In one of the letters in which he also explains the origin of the race, he writes:

A man’s a man, no matter what his blood, so long as that blood is good. The negro races, the mongrel races, the slavish races, the unprogressive races, are of bad blood—that is, of blood which is not qualified to permit them to successfully survive the selection by which the fittest survive, and which the next few centuries, in my opinion, will see terribly intensified.¹²¹

While this statement may seem harsh, Steffoff reminds the present-day reader that his views were common among intellectuals at that time and that London also believed that “it was their responsibility to treat other peoples well” and “his personal relations

¹¹⁷ Steffoff, *Jack London*, 44, 78.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹¹⁹ Joan London, *Jack London and His Times* (New York: Book League of America, 1939), 213.

¹²⁰ William E. Cain, “Socialism, Power, and the Fate of Style: Jack London in His Letters,” *American Literary History* 3, no. 3 (1991): 606, 604.

¹²¹ Earle Labor, Robert C. Leitz, III, and I. Milo Shepard, eds., *The Letters of Jack London*. (3 vols., Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988), 87.

with people from all backgrounds were noticeably free of racial prejudice.”¹²² Indeed, as Reesman, Hodson and Adam illustrate, while contemporary photographers attempted to portray the differences between them and the native people during their travels, London’s images of the natives were among the first to present them as human beings, with their individuality and pride. He refused to see them as “specimen.” The photographs show the natives in activities that were not foreign to his audience, such as fishing, hunting or family gatherings, and thus focuses on the similarities rather than the differences between the races. London liked to call his photographs “‘human documents,’ a phrase first used by the French novelists Alphonse Daudet and Edmond Goncourt.”¹²³ Indeed, “one who considers a certain work a human document,” argued William Stott, “identifies with the self it reveals; otherwise, he would not call it human.”¹²⁴ Even when he decided to visit the leper colony of Molokai, he chose to capture them in leisure activities, such as swimming and playing in a band, and celebrations, rather than to focus on their skin affected by the disease.

His view of the races seems to be directly applicable to the poor. At the beginning of the book, he refers to them as “a new and different race of people, short of stature, and of wretched or beer-sodden appearance,” later he refers to this “new race” as “street people.”¹²⁵ As previously mentioned, London experienced the life of the poor himself, partly through the struggles of his family and partly through his experience as a tramp. The poor awakened in him the fear of becoming one of them. For him, they represented this very life that he left behind and which he, with his pursuit of wealth, did all he could to escape. Indeed, as Joan London writes of the “helpless and unfit,” “his proximity to the fate of these members of his class terrified him.”¹²⁶

3.2 The People of the Abyss

Jack London was known to write for the marketplace and this book was originally supposed to be no exception. In a letter to Anna Strunsky, he wrote: “This book I am plunging through with will not be a great book. In two weeks and a couple of days I have done almost half of it. It is written, first, for money; second, in its own small

¹²² Steffoff, *Jack London*, 106–107.

¹²³ Reesman, Hodson and Adam, *Jack London, Photographer*, 149–150, 10.

¹²⁴ William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 8.

¹²⁵ Jack London, *The People of the Abyss* (New York: Macmillan, 1903), 7, 209.

¹²⁶ London, *Jack London and His Times*, 91.

way, for the human good.”¹²⁷ During his experience in London, however, he began to perceive the book as more than just another work to earn money. As Kevin Swafford sees it, his later motives appeared to be only “moral indignation and ethical purpose.”¹²⁸ His second wife, Chairman London, confirmed it, stating: “As if in negation of his consistent attitude on the mighty dollar, Jack put his heart and precious time into this exposition of London’s East End with full belief that it would not prove a money maker.”¹²⁹ The experience had a strong impact on him that would last many years. At the end of his career, he told her that “of all [his] books on the long shelf” he loves this one the most, adding: “No other book of mine took so much of my young heart and tears as that study of the economic degradation of the poor.”¹³⁰

In August 1902, London was on his way to Africa to write articles about the conditions after the end of the Boer War. He planned to stop in London for two days to see the coronation ceremony of Edward VII. In New York, he was told that the assignment was canceled. He managed to convince the Macmillan editor to fund a project of his own and headed to London.¹³¹ He was aware of the London’s East End reputation, not only from his reading of many books on the subject. His goal was to “find out how the other half lived,” with which he directly refers to Riis’s work. Though he had a sufficient knowledge of the slums, he writes in the preface that he was “open to be convinced by the evidence of [his] eyes.”¹³²

London’s approach was in many ways different from Riis’s. According to his daughter, he intended to be objective and describe his experience unemotionally. He failed to do so, as she believes that it reveals more about him than his autobiographical works.¹³³ Richard L. Stein called the book “socioautobiography,” “the story of London in London.”¹³⁴ Indeed, the book depicts his life among the poor with whom he converses, sleeps and eats. Riis’s text is based on years of his and others’ experience and observations, which is in sharp contrast to London’s seven weeks of

¹²⁷ Labor, Leitz and Shepard, *Letters of Jack London*, 309.

¹²⁸ Kevin Swafford, “Among the Disposable: Jack London in The East End of London,” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 48, no. 2 (2015): 36.

¹²⁹ Chairman London, *The Book of Jack London* (New York: Century, 1921), 381–82.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 381.

¹³¹ Steffoff, *Jack London*, 70–72.

¹³² London, *Abyss*, 86, vii.

¹³³ London, *Jack London and His Times*, 247.

¹³⁴ Richard L. Stein, “London’s Londons: Photographing Poverty in The People of the Abyss,” *Nineteenth Century Contexts* 22, no. 4 (2001): 590.

living in a slum of a city that is foreign to him. The author's presence is only emphasized by his appearance in one of the photographs (fig. 3.1).



Figure 3.1. Jack London, “Bert and the Author Ready to Pick Hops,” *The People of the Abyss*, p. 172. The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

It shows the author and one of his companions, a cobbler who could not resist the temptation for adventure, ready to pick hops. London put on his “seafaring togs” and advised Bert to take his worst clothes as well. He worries that they came “too ill-dressed for the business” but soon realize they are “as well clad, if not better, than the average hopper.”¹³⁵ He adds: “Some of the bunches of rags we chanced upon were marvellous.” Stein calls them “Londoners on Holiday,” believes that the illustration emphasizes the joke and that his choice of words is what “gives away the game.”¹³⁶ At the end of the day, they are aware of not having enough money to last the next day, Sunday, when there is no work. To escape the threat of imprisonment for begging, he writes: “We joyfully thanked God that we were not as other men, especially hoppers, and went down the road to Maidstone, jingling in our pockets the half-crowns and florins we had

¹³⁵ London, *Abyss*, 172–73.

¹³⁶ Stein, “London’s Londons,” 615.

brought from London.”¹³⁷ The chapter, as well as other parts of *Abyss*, is filled with humor, which, according to Stein, “undercuts the book’s social arguments.”¹³⁸

London’s approach, in contrast to Riis’s, presents the reader with an experience not only from the view of an observer, but, more importantly, from the viewpoint of the poor. London drew inspiration for his fiction from his experiences and this book is no exception. London’s clothes played an important role in his disguise of a runaway American sailor. As soon as he acquired old clothes, he noticed many changes. People addressed him “mate” instead of a “sir” or “governor,” he “escaped the pestilence of tipping,” people gave him money and he had to be more aware of traffic. As for himself, he realized that “the fear of the crowd no longer haunted [him].” He “had become one of them.”¹³⁹ As Swafford observes, his interactions with the poor from this standpoint resulted in them not being labeled objects of class-based discourse and ideology.¹⁴⁰ London rented a room to which he regularly returned to wash, sleep and write and several times he revealed his identity to his companions. Nevertheless, the detailed descriptions of the life of the poor which he experienced himself, such as their constant search for work, the conditions of the workhouses, “beds” they sleep in, as well as all-night walking when no shelter was found, and their survival tips—buying a cup of tea in a restaurant and drinking it as long as possible while gathering leftovers—are valuable and necessary for the reader to imagine their daily struggles.

London wrote about the book that it is “of a correspondent writing from the field of industrial war.”¹⁴¹ The book’s purpose as seen by London is different from the reformer’s standpoint of Riis. As Swafford observes, he regarded the slums and the street folk as “the by-product of an industrialized market economy and of a callous culture of neglect and indifference.”¹⁴² In a few places, such as when he refers to the Golden Rule, he addresses the reader:

Where you would not have your own babe live, and develop, and gather to itself knowledge of life and the things of life, is not a fit place for the babes of other men to live, and develop, and gather to themselves knowledge of life and the things of life. It is a simple thing, this

¹³⁷ London, *Abyss*, 179.

¹³⁸ Stein, “London’s Londons,” 614.

¹³⁹ London, *Abyss*, 13–15.

¹⁴⁰ Swafford, “Among the Disposable,” 33.

¹⁴¹ King Hendricks and Irving Shepard, eds., *Letters from Jack London, Containing an Unpublished Correspondence between London and Sinclair Lewis* (New York: Odyssey Press, 1965), 138.

¹⁴² Swafford, “Among the Disposable,” 20.

Golden Rule, and all that is required. Political economy and the survival of the fittest can go hang if they say otherwise. What is not good enough for you is not good enough for, other men, and there's no more to be said.¹⁴³

Yet he does not seem to consider himself a social reformer, nor does he believe that this work had the potential. Some critics considered the work a socialist writing which, as his wife stated, London denied. As she reported, his answer would be: “I merely state the disease, as I saw it. [...] I have not, within the pages of *that* book, stated the cure as I see it.”¹⁴⁴ Nevertheless, it is a work of social documentation. The book was published in 1903, after parts of it appeared in magazines, accompanied by pictures. It was published in the same year as *The Call of the Wild* which made an already famous London a star.¹⁴⁵ London was among the most photographed celebrities of his time.¹⁴⁶ When Judith R. Walkowitz compares London to Miss Malverry, who found in his work an inspiration for her portrait series, she mentions that both works depend on the author’s status of a celebrity. She also indirectly refers to *Abyss* as a work of photojournalism,¹⁴⁷ which must have been influenced by his other journalistic assignments and which illustrates the overlap of photojournalism and documentary photography. Besides his shorter work for magazines, *The Cruise of the Snark* (1911) and *Abyss* are his only works illustrated with his own photographs.

The book includes 76 images. In a letter to Bailey Millard in 1906 London wrote: “I gathered every bit of the material, read hundreds of books and thousands of pamphlets, newspapers and Parliamentary Reports, composed *The People of the Abyss*, and typed it all out, took two-thirds of the photographs with my own camera, [...] and did it all in two months.”¹⁴⁸ He did not give any further information about which of the images are his or whether the rest of them were part of the material he gathered from other sources.

Most of the images function similarly to Riis’s, as an illustration and an additional value to the text. Their role as an evidence to the reports, for which they are most valued

¹⁴³ London, *Abyss*, 212–13.

¹⁴⁴ London, *Book of Jack London*, 381. Italics in the original.

¹⁴⁵ Steffoff, *Jack London*, 73.

¹⁴⁶ Reesman, Hodson and Adam, *Jack London, Photographer*, 4.

¹⁴⁷ Judith R. Walkowitz, “The Indian Woman, the Flower Girl, and the Jew: Photojournalism in Edwardian London,” *Victorian Studies* 42, no. 1 (1998): 11.

¹⁴⁸ Labor, Leitz and Shepard, *Letters of Jack London*, 549. Italics in the original.

in similar works, seems to be in some instances counterproductive. Consider the photograph titled in the book as “An East-End ‘Slavey’” (fig. 3.2).



Figure 3.2. “An East End Slavey,” Jack London’s album for *The People of the Abyss*. JLP 466, Album 28, #03572. The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

In the text that immediately surrounds the photograph, London states that “her position in life was pitiable and contemptible” and that she looked at him “with pity and contempt.”¹⁴⁹ The photograph, in contrast to the text, shows a young woman smiling. Though she is kneeling on the floor near a bucket she likely uses for wiping, her overall appearance does not seem to support the text either. Stein states that her smile could have been a result of a typical response to the camera.¹⁵⁰ Whether it was so or not, the photograph fails to support the author’s impression of the encounter.

¹⁴⁹ London, *Abyss*, 17.

¹⁵⁰ Stein, “London’s Londons,” 617.



Figure 3.3. Jack London, “A Group of Jewish Children,” *The People of the Abyss*, p. 220. The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

Similarly, the image titled “A Group of Jewish Children” (fig. 3.3) does not seem to relate to the text. Surrounding text describes the consequences of “class degradation” which leads to the creation of “short and stunted people.” The children, alongside women, are described as “pale and anæmic, with eyes ringed darkly, who stoop and slouch, and are early twisted out of all shapeliness and beauty.”¹⁵¹ In the picture, however, there is a group of children which do not seem to fit the description, many of whom are smiling. The positions of the children within the group, as well as their evident attention paid to the camera, suggest an interaction between them and the photographer. Stein mentions that London captioned the pictures but did not necessarily include that information in the book. Such a caption reveals that the crowd gathered around a stand camera which he prepared in a court.¹⁵²

In many of his images the subjects look in the camera and, in some instances, such as in the passage with “Slavey” mentioned above, he directly refers to them in the text. There, however, he never mentions photographing them, nor even having

¹⁵¹ London, *Abyss*, 220.

¹⁵² Stein, “London’s Londons,” 611.

the camera with him. That could have been a result of his writing the text without necessarily taking the images into account at that point. While he might have intended to add them to the parts that were to appear in magazines, a letter to an editor G. Brett from February 1903, suggests that he composed the manuscript without them. In that letter, he writes: “I have a few photographs, which I took, which are now with the copy being serially published. Later on, when we see how these photographs reproduce, would it not be well to consider the advisability of putting a few of them in the book?”¹⁵³ His mentioning “a few of them,” which resulted in 76 photographs, further suggests that not all of them were intended to accompany and in consequence be necessary to the text. The disharmony between the text and the images might be a result of this later addition.

Some of the titles of the photographs seem to be inaccurate, stating what London wishes the reader to see, rather than what was captured. Consider the image below.



Figure 3.4. Jack London, “Along Leicester Square at Night,” *The People of the Abyss*, p. 114. The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

The title “Along Leicester at Night” (fig. 3.4) reveals that the scene represented happened at dark. The white sky alone, however, proves this title to be false. At night,

¹⁵³ Hendricks and Shepard, *Letters from Jack London*, 147.

the lamps would be the sole sources of light, unless he used a flash, which would be easily recognizable. The surrounding text mentions the homeless who are forced to walk all night in the rain. It seems that London thus selected images that were not taken on the occasion, neither did they represent the situation at hand, and used the titles to create an illusion that they are connected. The title of the following image seems to be used for the same purpose.



Figure 3.5. Jack London, “I Saw One Old Woman, a Sheer Wreck, Sleeping Soundly,” *The People of the Abyss*, p. 115. The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

In the text, London mentions a woman sleeping “soundly against the iron railings of Green Park” at four o’clock at night. The title of the image that precedes this passage, “I Saw One Old Woman, a Sheer Wreck, Sleeping Soundly” (fig. 3.5), seems to illustrate the occasion. Not only that she slept “soundly,” London also refers to her in the text as “one old woman, between fifty and sixty, a sheer wreck.”¹⁵⁴ The woman on the picture, however, sleeps under a tree during the day. No “iron railings” are to be seen in the photograph. Moreover, he describes a heavy rain during that night which is not visible on neither of the photographs.

¹⁵⁴ London, *Abyss*, 116.

Compare, for example, with an image titled “Each Bench Was Jammed with Sleeping Occupants” (fig. 3.6), which was taken at night.



Figure 3.6. Jack London, “Each Bench Was Jammed with Sleeping Occupants,” *The People of the Abyss*, Frontispiece. The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

London’s use of the flash, similarly to Riis’s, is intrusive but necessary. This photograph, which was used as a frontispiece, represents one of the images that are directly linked to the text. In fact, as Stein observes, it depends on the text for its interpretation.¹⁵⁵ In *Abyss*, the image refers to a certain page on which the author describes the moment of the encounter. There, however, the reader determines that the picture was taken during the night of the coronation. At any other day, as London mentions in a different chapter, such a scene at three in the morning could not be observed, as the parks are closed, and policemen do not let the homeless sleep anywhere. London asks himself why the homeless are locked out of the parks at night, only to be permitted to go inside and sleep after five in the morning. While he does not attempt to solve the problem, he addresses the readers and asks them to be sympathetic to the sleeping people during the day:

And so, dear soft people, should you ever visit London Town, and see these men asleep on the benches and in the grass, please do not think they are lazy creatures, preferring sleep to work.

¹⁵⁵ Stein, “London’s Londons,” 621.

Know that the powers that be have kept them walking all the night long, and that in the day they have nowhere else to sleep.¹⁵⁶

Swafford divides London's photographs of the poor into two types, relatively spontaneous representations and staged scenes.¹⁵⁷ To the latter group, he believes, belongs an image that shows two women fighting (fig. 3.7).



Figure 3.7. Jack London, "Conflict Again Precipitated," *The People of the Abyss*, p. 52. The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

Such a photograph would be hard to take during the action, due to the movements of the women. In the surrounding text, the author describes the fight as he heard it from his room: "and then rock evidently on the head from the shriek that goes up. A lull; apparently one combatant temporarily disabled and being resuscitated; child's voice audible again."¹⁵⁸ Nothing suggests that he went to the yard to see the fight which supports the presumption that the image was later staged for the purpose of illustration

¹⁵⁶ London, *Abyss*, 120.

¹⁵⁷ Swafford, "Among the Disposable," 38.

¹⁵⁸ London, *Abyss*, 51.

of the text. Stein also believes that the image of a “Slavey,” reproduced above, was staged. Her smile seems to support his argument. The book version of the photograph was cropped to remove the figure of the man who is standing behind her and, as Stein suggests, watching the scene being staged.¹⁵⁹ The image reproduced here is the original photograph, the lines of the cropped version which served as an illustration in the book are visible in the image (see fig. 3.2).

Many of London’s photographs are of the street without any of the subjects being prominent in the picture, some of which do not even have people in them. London’s captions were not the only means of connecting the photographs to the story. He used his images to express his vision and feelings of the place. For that purpose, he did not only attempt to change the way the reader interprets his images, he did not even mind altering what was captured. In one of the photographs of the street, as Stein observes,¹⁶⁰ London added a subject from a different photograph (fig. 3.8).



Figure 3.8. Jack London, “Nowhere May One Escape the Sight of Abject Poverty,” *The People of the Abyss*, p. 6. The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

¹⁵⁹ Stein, “London’s Londons,” 611.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 611–13.

In the text below the image, London states: “Nowhere in the streets of London may one escape the sight of abject poverty, while five minutes’ walk from almost any point will bring one to a slum.”¹⁶¹ To support this claim and provide the reader with an evidence, London created a contrast between the old man, a representative of the poor, and the well-dressed women whose presence in the street proves its distance from the slum area. The original photograph from which the man was transported, was also used in the text, following the altered picture. There, however, it is used to show the elderly searching for food in the mud, and the children who “clustered like flies around a festering mass of fruit, [...] drawing forth morsels, but partially decayed, which they devoured on the spot.”¹⁶² That image (fig. 3.9) reveals the left part which includes the old man and which was cropped out for the book’s version of the photograph. There is a visible line—especially on the ground—which illustrates how much of the image was removed.



Figure 3.9. “A Market, Tottering Old Men and Women,” Jack London’s album for *The People of the Abyss*. JLP 466, Album 28, #03575. The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

Both Riis and London use the text to narrow the interpretation of the photographs according to their views and aims. Although London might have seen such an occurrence regularly and could have also staged such a photograph, this method,

¹⁶¹ London, *Abyss*, 6.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 7.

as well as serious cropping of photographs to omit certain subjects or objects, would be unacceptable nowadays if discovered. I believe that even in his time, even though people were not used to questioning the reliability of images, were he to pursue a similar career to Riis's, his credibility would suffer.

Perhaps all the manipulation with his images could have been necessary in his eyes to provide the reader with the reality as it was, not the reality he captured. Although, as he states in the preface, he "was open to be convinced by the evidence of [his] eyes," in the chapter in which he describes the coronation procession, he seriously questions his eyes' ability to perceive the hidden social truth. Regarding the procession, which he compared to circuses, he mentions that he had never seen "anything so hopeless and so tragic." When he was watching the king, he felt the excitement of the crowd that had gone mad and he too wanted to shout with them the blessings. Nevertheless, while the view offered golden coaches and crowns, he was aware of his companions in the crowd beside him and the irony could not go unnoticed: "Ragged men about me, tears in their eyes, are tossing up their hats and crying ecstatically, 'Bless 'em! Bless 'em! Bless 'em!' [...] And I check myself with a rush, striving to convince myself that it is all real and rational, and not some glimpse of fairyland."¹⁶³

The author's feelings about the procession as well as the contrast between the rich and the poor are not recognizable from the photographs. Not focusing on details, they show the procession, the coaches and the crowd. They are, to use Stein's language, "excessively bland." He compares them to photographs that can be bought from commercial photographers and suggests that London might have done so. Stein believes that "their very dullness suggests skepticism about the possibilities of using photography to capture hidden social truths, skepticism about photographic investigation as such."¹⁶⁴ London's views expressed in this passage seem to summarize his approach of using his photographs which is based on their limitations of what they can capture, as much as on their ability to serve as a support and an evidence for his experiences.

The irony expressed above is not a rare occasion in the book. As Swafford observes, in his descriptions, London frequently moves "from images of misery and the

¹⁶³ London, *Abyss*, vii, 138, 146.

¹⁶⁴ Stein, "London's Londons," 620.

mundane into the grotesque.”¹⁶⁵ London was a devoted farmer and his love for nature is visible in a passage in which he compares its beauty with the poor coming from the city:

Slum, stews, and ghetto pour them forth, and the festering contents of slum, stews, and ghetto are undiminished. Yet they overrun the country like an army of ghouls, and the country does not want them. [...] As they drag their squat, misshapen bodies along the highways and byways, they resemble some vile spawn from underground. Their very presence, the fact of their existence, is an outrage to the fresh bright sun and the green and growing things. The clean, up-standing trees cry shame upon them and their withered crookedness, and their rottenness is a slimy desecration of the sweetness and purity of nature.¹⁶⁶

Cain believes that in this passage, London expresses the “disfiguring ideas” that are visible in his letters, adding that “London’s irony goes awry, evoking a nightmare of festering, ghoulish forms that defile pristine nature.”¹⁶⁷



Figure 3.10. Jack London, “A Typical London Hopper and his Mate ‘Padding the Hoof’ in Kent,” *The People of the Abyss*, p. 98. The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

¹⁶⁵ Swafford, “Among the Disposable,” 21.

¹⁶⁶ London, *Abyss*, 168.

¹⁶⁷ Cain, “Socialism, Power, and Fate of Style,” 606.

Looking at the photograph of typical hoppers (fig. 3.10), however, the reader would hardly assume that the subjects are of the group described above.

Riis emphasized the role of the slum environment in the fate of the poor. London expresses similar concerns. In contrast to Riis, however, he generalizes the situation at hand and blames not just their immediate environment, but the city itself: “At the best, city life is an unnatural life for the human; but the city life of London is so utterly unnatural that the average workman or workwoman cannot stand it.” The strong workforce comes from the countryside, where the men were not corrupted by the city. They, however, soon become weak as well: “Moral and physical stamina are broken, and the good workman, fresh from the soil, becomes in the first city generation a poor workman; and by the second city generation, [...] unable physically to perform the labor his father did, he is well on the way to the shambles at the bottom of the Abyss.”¹⁶⁸

London sees the beauty, vitality and hope in children, who, except for their rags, do not differ from other children. Nevertheless, the conditions of the slums give them only two options. They “die like flies” or adopt to the degradation and gradually join the crowd of “stunted forms, ugly faces, and blunt and stolid minds.” London thus concludes that “the Abyss is literally a huge man-killing machine” and believes that if civilization has nothing else to offer, “howling and naked savagery” is preferable.¹⁶⁹ He goes as far as comparing them to the Inuit people of Alaska who live a better life, as they are all properly sheltered, clothed and kept warm. Starvation is for them a natural occurrence of bad times. The English folk, however, lack all of these. For the Inuit folk, “starvation, as a chronic condition, present with a large number of them all the time, is a thing unknown.”¹⁷⁰

London supports his claims in *Abyss* with statistics, although not to such an extent as did Riis, and besides occasional humor and irony, he focuses on serious consequences of the lives under the governing powers he calls “the management.” He mentions, for example, that “fifty-five per cent of the East End children die before they are five years old.”¹⁷¹ As stated above, Riis reveals concerns of a mother whose

¹⁶⁸ London, *Abyss*, 45–46.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 274–277, 47, 288.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 312.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 304.

child is about to die, due to the lack of money for its burial. London's observations go even further:

And if they are very poor, it is kept for some time until they can bury it. During the day it lies on the bed; during the night, when the living take the bed, the dead occupies the table, from which, in the morning, when the dead is put back into the bed, they eat their breakfast. Sometimes the body is placed on the shelf which serves as pantry for their food. Only a couple of weeks ago, an East End woman was in trouble, because, in this fashion, being unable to bury it, she had kept her dead child three weeks.¹⁷²

Yet, London struggles to show this side of the Abyss in his images. As Stein stated, "the very immediacy of photographic data paradoxically distances the 'abyss' of urban poverty he sets out to explore and explain."¹⁷³ As his daughter Joan concludes, the Abyss had a strong impact upon London, resulting in a "new loathing and fear of poverty," and nothing would persuade him to continue in his explorations of slums in different cities, even though such books of social reporting were popular at that time.¹⁷⁴

In a letter to his friends, the Sterlings, he writes that he attempted to finish the book as soon as possible so he could leave "the country God has forgotten that he forgot," adding: "I should die if I had to live two years in the East End of London." He also mentions that what he writes about "will have to be expurgated or it will never see magazine publication." Indeed, a year afterward, in a letter to Brett, he mentions that he made changes to the manuscript, softened it, "made it more presentable in many ways and added a preface and a concluding chapter."¹⁷⁵ In the preface, the horrors he describes in the book were emphasized by his remark that the times were considered "good times" in England.¹⁷⁶ From his attempts to connect the images of smiling subjects to the seriousness of the text, it seems that while the images selected could have been among the changes he made, they were not included in his resolution to make the book "more presentable."

¹⁷² London, *Abyss*, 304.

¹⁷³ Stein, "London's Londons," 590.

¹⁷⁴ London, *Jack London and His Times*, 242, 250.

¹⁷⁵ Hendricks and Shepard, *Letters from Jack London*, 137, 146.

¹⁷⁶ London, *Abyss*, vii.



Figure 3.11. Jack London, “A Chill, Raw Wind Was Blowing, and These Creatures Huddled There Sleeping or Trying to Sleep,” *The People of the Abyss*, p. 62. The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

While some photographs show the dark and hopeless situations of the “street people,” depicting them sleeping (see figs. 3.5, 3.6 and 3.11) or even eating in the mud (see fig. 3.9), they are, however, in a sharp contrast with other images from the book, as illustrated above. With these, as Stein observes, it seems “as if London the photographer tries to discover a less hopeless, less uniform city.”¹⁷⁷ To use Riis’s metaphor, it seems that while in the text, London uncovered the “rotten core” of the apple, in most of his photographs, he failed to penetrate its “fair skin.” They are, nevertheless, important visual documents of the times and an essential part of the work and should not be overlooked.

The book itself sold well, the number of first publication exceeded 20 000 copies, was well received and, as Swafford believes, “established London’s importance as a writer among many critical readers.”¹⁷⁸ London himself wrote to his editor that it “will hit big or not hit at all.”¹⁷⁹ Nevertheless, Joan summarized its sale as “not large,” which could have reflected the subsequent unfulfilled hopes of London. He was criticized by

¹⁷⁷ Stein, “London’s Londons,” 605.

¹⁷⁸ Swafford, “Among the Disposable,” 16.

¹⁷⁹ Hendricks and Shepard, *Letters from Jack London*, 138.

his reviewers for his expressiveness and his comparison of the East End to his standards of living, however, as she states, London was grateful for the “small prestige” it brought him among serious readers.¹⁸⁰

¹⁸⁰ London, *Jack London and His Times*, 247, 250.

4 Social Documentation in the 1930s

Following the Tenement House Exhibition, the urban reform movement continued with such projects as the Pittsburgh Survey in 1907. Its principal staff photographer was Lewis Hine, the most prominent social reformer after Riis, who was offered this post based on his portraits of immigrants at Ellis Island, taken to facilitate their acceptance in the American society. As Stange sees it, the survey represented a new way of investigation, shifting from “the individual focused scrutiny of surveillance” to “the anonymously broad and impersonally preventive survey,” which, as they conveyed it to the masses, represented fully the interests of actual people.¹⁸¹ The aim of the investigation was to record the working and living conditions in the city. It was one of the first of its kind, took two years and its findings were, illustrated with images, published in magazines, as well as in a book form, in six volumes. Hine’s other famous and influential work includes photographs he produced for the National Child Labor Committee which greatly contributed to the cause, a series of individual portraits of workers known as “Work Portraits” and images documenting the construction of the Empire State Building in the 1930s.

The first World War attracted the attention of many, resulting in a decline of reformist programs. Social issues seized to be of paramount importance and the influence of European avant-garde movements in the arts, which made sentiment in the documentary style seemed old-fashioned, did not improve the situation in the 1920s. During that time, the photographers chose to focus on portraiture as a means of social documentation, the most influential of which were Hine’s portraits of the working-class people. In Europe, in the first half of the twentieth century, the emphasis was on political action, not giving the photographers an opportunity for social documentation in a manner of Riis or Hine. The most prominent portraitist of the time was August Sander. His work *Antlitz der Zeit (Face of Our Time)*, depicting individuals from all classes and professions in Germany, was banned in part because his close-up portraits showed great differences in the appearance of German population which were believed not to exist by the official mythology. Sander was subsequently forced to move his focus to different types of photography.¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ Stange, *Symbols*, 48.

¹⁸² Rosenblum, *World History of Photography*, 363–65.

Social documentary photography flourished in the 1930s, largely due to the Great Depression. In Europe, photographers sought to document the situation caused by high unemployment. Their efforts became known as the worker-photographer movement. The evidence the photographs provided was not meant for the middle-class with the purpose of improving the conditions of the workers, but, as Rosenblum states, to “make other working people conscious of their conditions and their political strengths.”¹⁸³ Such works include a publication of the German movement, *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf* (*The Worker-Photographer*).

Lewis Hine himself saw a great potential in social documentation from the viewpoint of the workers themselves and earlier in 1909 advised them to fight using the camera:

The greatest advance in social work is to be made by the popularizing of camera work, so these records may be made by those who are in the thick of the battle. It is not a difficult proposition. In every group of workers there is sure to be one at least who is interested in the camera. If you can decide that photography would be a good thing for you, get a camera, [...] go after the matter with a sympathetic enthusiasm (for camera work without enthusiasm is like a picnic in the rain). The local photographer (unless he is a rare one) cannot do much for you. Fight it out yourself, for better little technique and much sympathy than the reverse. Returns? Of course they will follow.¹⁸⁴

In 1933 and 1934, two large international exhibitions were held in Prague, with the participation of photographers from several European countries. As Rosenblum emphasizes, the content of the photographs was strongly political. In America, the documentation of the Great Depression is closely tied to the FSA project, to which I will return. In 1936, appeared the Photo League, with its primary focus on the promotion of documentary photography. The photographers’ goal was to “depict the less picturesque aspects of urban life” which they believed were ignored by other photographers. One of the best realized projects was the Harlem Document, a three-year-long documentation of the life of New York’s most significant black neighborhood.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Rosenblum, *World History of Photography*, 372.

¹⁸⁴ Lewis W. Hine, “Social Photography,” in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, Conn.: Leete’s Island Books, 1980), 112.

¹⁸⁵ Rosenblum, *World History of Photography*, 372–75.

Many books published in the 1930s shifted from the tradition of having photographs as illustrations to the text to having photographs as the focus of the book. These collections of photographs had, except for a usual preface or other text introducing them, little or no text to accompany them—mostly describing the image, giving space for the photographs to occupy the whole page. Such publications include Lewis Hine’s *Men at Work*, Walker Evans’s *American Photographs*, Bill Brandt’s *A Night in London* or *The English at Home*.

At the same period, several collaborations also appeared, resulting in books with photographs accompanied by a text of a different author. Around 1930, a photo-essay emerged. This new publishing form not only gave more space for photos in magazines but also strengthened their importance. As François Brunet observes, it also greatly influenced the appearance of documentary literature in the interwar period.¹⁸⁶ Such works include Dorothea Lange and her husband Paul Taylor’s *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion*, Berenice Abbott’s *Changing New York* with text by Elizabeth McCausland or Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell’s *You Have Seen Their Faces*. Bourke-White and Caldwell spent eighteen months traveling together, documenting the lives of sharecroppers during the Great Depression. “This inexpensive paperback,” notes Rosenblum, “helped prepare the way for the profusion of post-World War II photographic books on a wide spectrum of social issues.”¹⁸⁷ A similar project, a collaboration of the photographer Walker Evans and the writer James Agee, resulted in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,¹⁸⁸ which I will focus on in greater detail in this chapter.

4.1 The FSA Project

During the period of the Great Depression, many farmers who suffered the calamities of drought and economic depression left their land and migrated west in search of jobs and arable land. Part of the New Deal, a governmental program providing support for farmers and the unemployed, was a project under the Historic Section of the Resettlement Administration (RA), later renamed the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Best known as the FSA project nowadays, it aimed to provide a visual

¹⁸⁶ François Brunet, *Photography and Literature* (London: Reaktion books, 2009), 56.

¹⁸⁷ Rosenblum, *World History of Photography*, 369.

¹⁸⁸ Hereafter cited as *Famous Men*.

documentation of the suffering farmers which was believed to be necessary for the justification of federal expenditures for relief projects.¹⁸⁹

The New Deal planner, Rexford Tugwell, realized from the beginning that words would not be effective enough to inform the public about the goals and effectiveness of the programs. He decided to photographically record the RA's activities, for which he hired Roy Stryker. Under his management, his staff photographers succeeded to fulfill this goal. During the life of the agency, eleven photographers contributed to the FSA collection of more than 250 thousand images depicting the life in the United States from 1935 to 1943. The photographers often complained about Stryker, believing their visual sense was better than his. They criticized him for destroying negatives he did not want to include in the file and for not allowing them to manage their own prints. While his photographers did not share the same style, technique or political views, they all contributed to the evolvement and relatively smooth functioning of the project, united by the same purpose.¹⁹⁰

The FSA project largely contributed to the development of the documentary style. While Riis, London and other photographers at the turn of the century were free to use their images as they thought best for their purpose and took advantage of the widespread belief of the undeniable reality of the pictures that was still preserved among the masses, the times changed during the first half of the twentieth century. Photographs appeared in newspapers and magazines on the daily basis and Hine's "you" from 1909 gradually came to include "the average person" as well:

The photograph has an added realism of its own; it has an inherent attraction not found in other forms of illustration. For this reason the average person believes implicitly that the photograph cannot falsify. Of course, you and I know that this unbounded faith in the integrity of the photograph is often rudely shaken, for, while photographs may not lie, liars may photograph.¹⁹¹

Many perceived the images of the FSA as propaganda of socialism and their use by the government was controversial. While Stryker argued against it, as Michael L. Carlebach and others see it, it was a propaganda of the federal programs and later, during the war years, of the strength and vitality of the US visible through images

¹⁸⁹ Rosenblum, *World History of Photography*, 366.

¹⁹⁰ Michael L. Carlebach, "Documentary and Propaganda: The Photographs of the Farm Security Administration," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 8 (1988): 17–18.

¹⁹¹ Hine, "Social Photography," 111.

showing more positive aspects. Although, Carlebach adds that “democratic propaganda that is truthful and factual is both credible and necessary.”¹⁹² Stott states that the propaganda was “evil” in the eyes of American citizens mainly because they associated it with the propaganda used by Fascists and the Soviets and that they believed that it tricked the nation into “a loathsome, pointless world war.” Stott argues that besides this “black propaganda,” as many perceived it, there also exists “white propaganda, put forward from an overt source, using actual fact to educate its audience.” He concludes that there are also “all shades of gray between.”¹⁹³

Despite the use of the images as propaganda, Stryker believed that it had no effect on their truthfulness and their value as historical documents that would serve as a visual history of American society and culture. Indeed, the policy of the FSA, overseen by Stryker, strictly forbid any kind of manipulation with the photographs, such as cropping or retouching, and photographers were warned not to manipulate their subjects. “For Stryker,” writes Carlebach, “the fact that the photographs were truthful, accurate records of actual events, people, and places, and that they were unadorned and unmanipulated, warranted their use by the government.” The context of the images was as important as always for understanding their power and their correct interpretation. As Carlebach states, the “combination of straightforward still images with political and social argument is the essence of social documentary photography.”¹⁹⁴ The official policy of the New Deal greatly contributed to the establishment of the documentary tradition, as the FSA project is considered the exemplar of documentary photography, Stange writes, “rather than the inheritor and culminating phase of a tradition.”¹⁹⁵

While the goal was not to touch what was captured and it might seem that complete objectivity played a vital role at the time, the role of the photographer and all the decisions he makes before pressing the shutter, such as the selection of the equipment used, lighting or the camera angle, as well as the moment of exposure, were acknowledged as a part of the photographer’s vision.

The FSA daily provided dozens of prints for reproduction to editors and publishers. They needed to reach mass audience to fulfill their goal to promote their

¹⁹² Carlebach, “Documentary and Propaganda,” 11.

¹⁹³ Stott, *Thirties America*, 22–23.

¹⁹⁴ Carlebach, “Documentary and Propaganda,” 9, 20.

¹⁹⁵ Stange, *Symbols*, 106.

photographic work, educate people, especially more fortunate classes living in cities, about the hardship of the poor and unemployed, and act as a catalyst for reform. The need for photographs was stimulated by the emergence of the photo-essay, which quickly became magazines' way of conveying information. FSA photographers had to follow shooting scripts, did not own the negatives and had no control over the use of their photographs. The editors were responsible for the reproduction of the photos, including cropping, captioning or arranging them to serve their purpose. As Rosenblum writes, on those assignments, the work of the photographers was similar to "photojournalists working for the commercial press," which both Lange and Evans disliked.¹⁹⁶ Nevertheless, the effort proved to be effective, the public responded favorably to the images and supported some of the programs.¹⁹⁷ The images appeared in various governmental materials and in many exhibitions. FSA photographs also appeared in over ten books, such as, besides already mentioned works by Lange and Evans, Sherwood Anderson's *Home Town* or Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam's *12 Million Black Voices*.¹⁹⁸

During 1937, the agency seized to be independent, was renamed and moved under the Department of Agriculture, resulting in Tugwell's resignation. In the late 1930s, partly because of this change of the government's publicity needs to which publishers' demand greatly contributed, the FSA began to also focus on the middle class, urban areas and the positive changes resulting in seeming health and vitality of the farm life, although the situation of those who needed the help the most had not much improved.¹⁹⁹

Stryker was amazed by the quality of the photographs he received from his employees, which were soon recognized by others not only for the purpose they served but also for their aesthetic quality. For the first time, images of social documentation were considered art and exhibit under the auspices of Museum of Modern Art.²⁰⁰ Some of the iconic images became symbols of the documentary style, as well as of the Great Depression, and became essential for later generations' understanding of the troubled times.

¹⁹⁶ Rosenblum, *World History of Photography*, 366–67.

¹⁹⁷ Carlebach, "Documentary and Propaganda," 19.

¹⁹⁸ Stange, *Symbols*, 111.

¹⁹⁹ Carlebach, "Documentary and Propaganda," 20–22.

²⁰⁰ Rosenblum, *World History of Photography*, 369.

One of those iconic images is undoubtedly Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother."

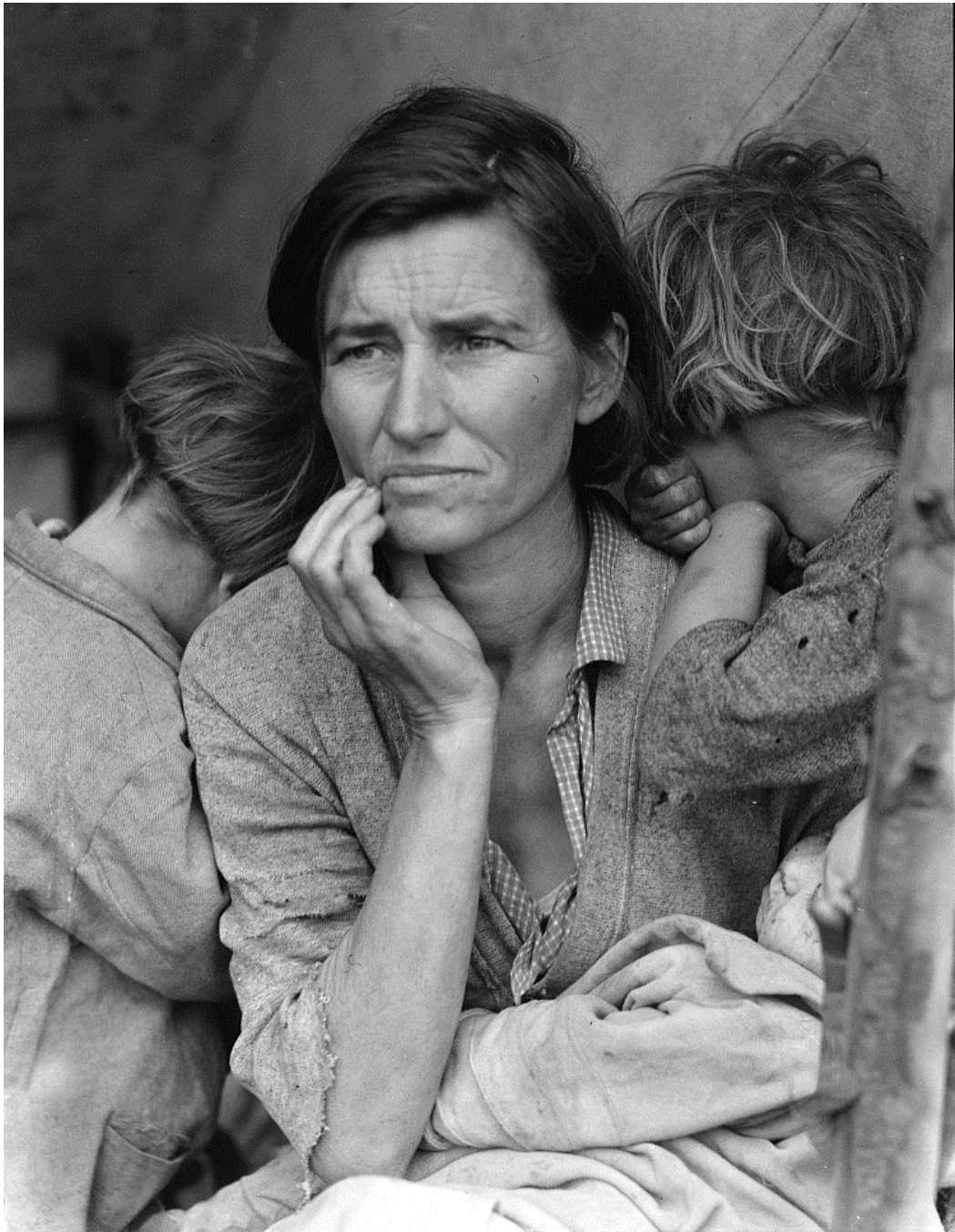


Figure 4.1. Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, Nipomo, Calif., 1936. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34-9058-C.

Lange knew immediately that what she captured was special and Stryker recognized it himself. The image became a symbol of not only the suffering of migrant farmers during the Great Depression. In 1941, already a "documentary masterpiece,"

the picture “was enshrined” in the Museum of Modern Art. Since then, it was reproduced many times, retitled and even refashioned for use in other cultures.²⁰¹

The five images from this ten-minute-long encounter, as Curtis concludes, indicate that Lange gave instructions to the mother and her children and posed them to achieve the desired pose. Lange asked her to move her right hand and touch her face. To support the sleeping infant, he suggests, the mother grasped the tent post with her left hand. Not visible at that moment, her thumb, very bright in the negative, became a distraction. Before the photograph’s permanent exhibition, Lange arranged for the thumb to be removed from the photograph.²⁰² The image reproduced here (fig. 4.1) is the altered version. However, the thumb, with its ghostly appearance, is still visible in the right corner near the bottom of the photograph. Stryker did not support Lange’s decision as it was against the official policy of the FSA. Considering that she directed her subject’s movements, the removal of the thumb, which in the image represents her only natural movement, as Curtis sees it, she “removed Migrant Mother further from the realm of reality toward that of universal symbolism.”²⁰³

4.2 Walker Evans and James Agee

Walker Evans studied French literature at college and was interested in writing. He ended up taking the camera instead but his interest in literature and other arts did not perish. He incorporated the inspiration from them in his photography, especially from Flaubert and Baudelaire. “I wasn’t very conscious of it then, but I know that Flaubert’s esthetic is absolutely mine,” he writes in 1971, four years before his death. “Flaubert’s method I think I incorporated almost unconsciously, but anyway used in two ways: his realism and naturalism both, and his objectivity of treatment; the non-appearance of author, the non-subjectivity. That is literally applicable to the way I want to use a camera and do.”²⁰⁴

Evans took some photographs for the Museum of Modern Art early in the 1930s. He was introduced to various artistic styles, some of which also influenced his later

²⁰¹ James C. Curtis, “Dorothea Lange, Migrant Mother, and the Culture of the Great Depression,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 21, no. 1 (1986): 1, 19.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ “An Interview with Walker Evans Pt. 1 (1971),” ASX, Leslie Katz with Walker Evans, last modified in October 17, 2011, <http://www.americansuburbx.com/2011/10/interview-an-interview-with-walker-evans-pt-1-1971.html>.

work. He found inspiration in regionalism and social realism, both being answers to European movements which the Americans wanted to suppress. From the precisionists, he learned to appreciate clean, hard lines and sought to produce sharp, realistic photographs with clear detail. To achieve such photographs and keep as much control over the composition as possible, he mainly used his 8x10 view camera which, James C. Curtis and Sheila Grannen write, many of his contemporary documentarists considered “too cumbersome for documentary fieldwork.”²⁰⁵ In 1938 Evans became the first American photographer to receive a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art which was followed by his photographic book *American Photographs* the same year.

Evans started working for the government in 1935 but he never identified with the political aspects of the project, neither did he have respect for Stryker. He summarizes his first impression, which lasted since, thus: “I went down there [...] when Roy Stryker didn’t know what he was doing, didn’t know why he was there. He was just a friend of Tugwell’s. I think he had been a history teacher. [...] It was crazy, you know. Nobody could take it seriously. It was just mad, inefficient bureaucracy.”²⁰⁶ Both of them, however, believed in documentary work. Evans preferred to refer to it as “documentary style,” since for him, “a literal document would be a police photograph of a murder scene. You see, a document has use, whereas art is really useless. Therefore art is never a document, though it certainly can adopt that style.”²⁰⁷ It is evident that he regarded his images as art, while Stryker perceived them first and foremost as historical documents of the 1930s American society.

Evans and other photographers fought for more control over their negatives and their use. He continued printing his work for his own needs. This practice, as well as his inaccessibility and his style, which produced a lesser number of images than his colleagues did, lead Stryker to dismiss him in 1937.²⁰⁸

In 1936, James Agee, the twenty-six-year-old writer for *Fortune* magazine, was asked to write an article about a sharecropper’s family. He insisted that Evans joins the project and succeeded to persuade *Fortune* to pay for the expenses, even though, Carol

²⁰⁵ James C. Curtis and Sheila Grannen, “Let Us Now Appraise Famous Photographs: Walker Evans and Documentary Photography,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 15, no. 1 (1980): 4.

²⁰⁶ “An Interview with Walker Evans (1971),” ASX, conducted by Paul Cummings, last modified in March 24, 2012, <http://www.americansuburbx.com/2012/03/interview-oral-history-interview-with-walker-evans-1971.html>.

²⁰⁷ ASX, “Walker Evans Pt. 1.”

²⁰⁸ Stange, *Symbols*, 116.

Shloss notes, Evans still worked for the government which would own the negatives.²⁰⁹ They spent the summer in Alabama, living with three tenant families and documenting their lives. Agee's manuscript delivered to the magazine was too long, did not meet the magazines' standards and was subsequently rejected and returned to him. Agee extended his work to a book form and struggled to find a publisher. He asked Evans to edit it and even though he knew the text needed it, he refused to interfere in Agee's part of the work.²¹⁰ The work was finally published in 1941. Despite positive reviews, the book sold poorly and went out of print a few years afterward. Stott believes, as do others, that it was not only because the book seriously challenged the tradition, but because people heard all they wanted about the problem by the time it got published and the Second World War further contributed to a decline of interest in the topic.²¹¹

After James Agee's death in 1955, his autobiographical novel *A Death in the Family* (1957) won the 1958 Pulitzer Prize and all his books were soon in print. His and Evans's *Famous Men* were no exception and a new edition with changes made by Walker Evans—doubled the number of photographs and added an essay about Agee—appeared in 1960. The new edition succeeded and managed to popularize both Agee's text and Evans's photographs.

4.3 Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

Famous Men represent a culmination of the documentary genre of the 1930s and its emphasis on the power of the images to stand as arguments themselves. Opening the book, one finds that all the photographs come first, before any text, without any text or captions to accompany them. The pages with photographs are not even numbered. The very first image is of the landlord, dressed in a suit which would prove a sharp contrast to the following images. Perhaps Evans wanted to ensure that the reader is aware from the beginning that there are forces directly influencing the conditions the families live in. According to Alan Trachtenberg, the landlord stands as “the unshakable reminder

²⁰⁹ Carol Shloss, *In Visible Light: Photography and the American Writer: 1840–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 179.

²¹⁰ William Stott, “Epilogue: Agee and Evans: ‘On the Porch: 4,’” in *New Critical Essays on James Agee and Walker Evans*, ed. Caroline Blinder (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 168–69.

²¹¹ Stott, *Thirties America*, 264.

of the governing system: private property, absentee landlordism, and exploitative tenancy.”²¹²

The photographs include portraits of individuals, as well as group pictures and images showing the details of their home. They are divided by a blank page into sections. While in the first edition, consisting of 31 images, there are only two sections, first presenting two families and the second the third, in the 1960 edition, Evans created four sections. He also increased the total number of images to 61 and removed six images that appeared in the first edition, most of which were candid shots taken with the 35mm camera. Perhaps to once again put the families in contrast to their surroundings, he ends the sequence with three images of the town. The 1960 edition goes even further. Evans ended the third section with a photograph of the family on a wagon pulled by mules, which serve as a transition,²¹³ moved the pictures of the town to the fourth section and added 16 images to set the families in the broader context of the 1930s and to further emphasize the contrast with the outside world.

Following the image of their landlord are the individual portraits of Floyd and Allie Mae Burroughs. As mentioned above, Evans preferred to work with his 8x10 camera which, due to its bulkiness, as is evident from Agee’s description, he could not do without the subjects’ knowing: “Walker setting up the terrible structure of the tripod crested by the black square heavy head, dangerous as that of a hunchback, of the camera; stooping beneath cloak and cloud of wicked cloth, and twisting buttons; a witchcraft preparing, colder than keenest ice, and incalculably cruel.”²¹⁴ To achieve maximum depth of field and sharp focus, as Curtis and Grannen observe, Evans used longer exposure times which required that the subjects remain stationary unless there was enough available light.²¹⁵ The subjects look straight at the camera and Evans takes the photographs on their eye level, not from weird angles by which he would be suggesting how to read them—such as from a low angle to make the subject appear stronger. Evans used the Leica as well, 35mm camera that allowed him to move around, though he did not seem to like the look of the images and preferred not to catch them

²¹² Alan Trachtenberg, “Walker Evans’s Contrapuntal Design: The Sequences of Photographs in the First and Second Editions of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” in *New Critical Essays on James Agee and Walker Evans*, ed. Caroline Blinder (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 74.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 74.

²¹⁴ James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 364.

²¹⁵ Curtis and Grannen, “Famous Photographs,” 5.

off guard. Moreover, his method gave them time to prepare themselves and thus did not deprive them of their dignity.

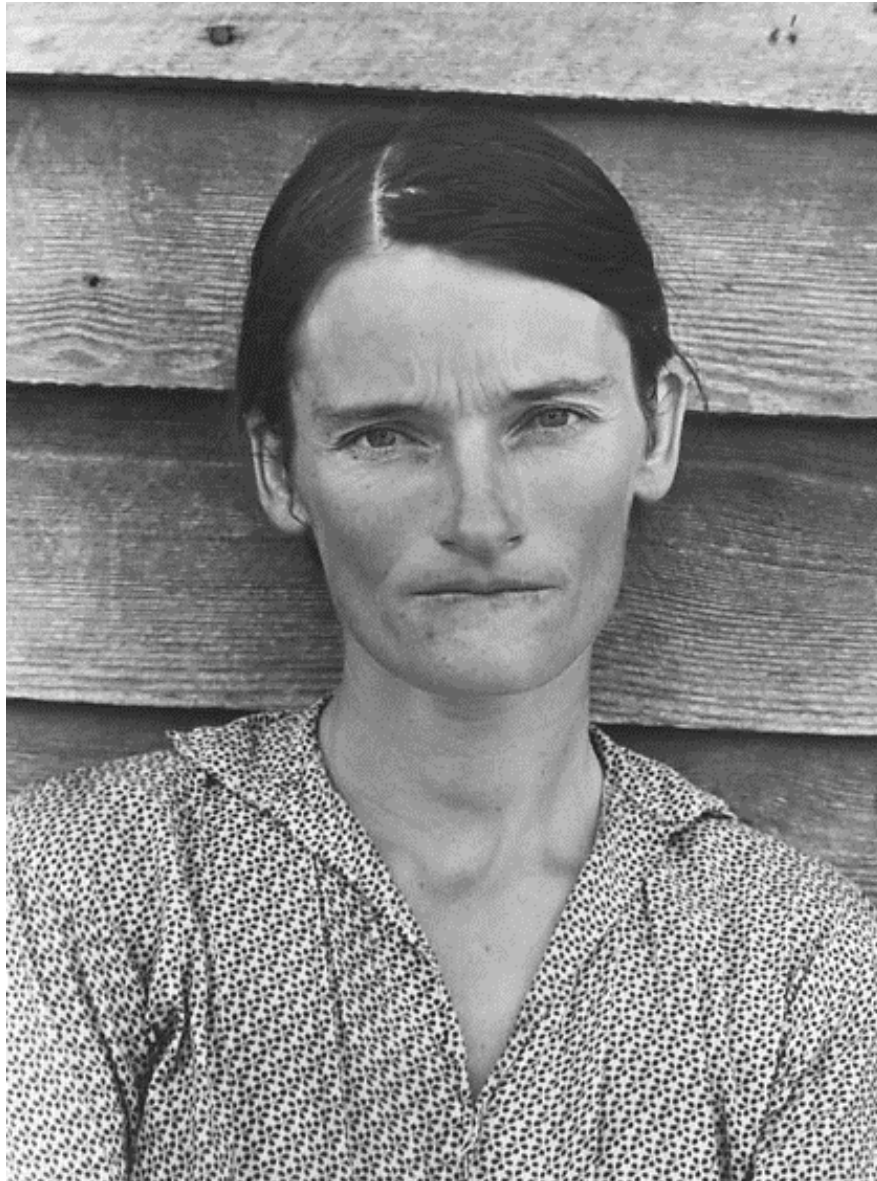


Figure 4.2. Walker Evans, *Allie Mae Burroughs*, Hale County, Alabama, 1936. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994.258.425.

As T. V. Reed suggests, the sections of photographs look like family albums. While the group shots can be seen as home-made photos, the associations of which is further emphasized by a photograph of two family snapshots hanging on the wall, the individual portraits resemble commercial studio work. The photographer is thus not there to exploit them but, as the portraits suggest, rather to “[serve] the tenants.”²¹⁶ Lionel Trilling, regarding the portrait of Allie Mae Burroughs, mentions that the dignity

²¹⁶ T. V. Reed, “Unimagined Existence and the Fiction of the Real: Postmodernist Realism in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,” *Representations* 24, Special Issue: America Reconstructed, 1840–1940 (1988): 171.

of the subject largely depends on the permission “to defend herself against the lens.” According to Trilling, “Mrs. Gudger [as she is called in the book], with all her misery and perhaps with her touch of pity for herself, simply refuses to be an object of ‘social consciousness’; she refuses to be an object at all—everything in the picture proclaims her to be all subject.”²¹⁷

That is ultimately what Evans and Agee attempted to achieve, as is evident from Agee’s text throughout the book. Evans, however, was careful with his selection of the images. As Stott suggests, that meant that “a posed family portrait of the Gudgers in their Sunday best,” in which they wear their best clothes, Allie Mae smiles and they do not look like people in desperate need of help, a photograph that “most reveals Evan’s bias,” was not selected in either edition.²¹⁸ The photograph (fig. 4.3) also shows Emma (standing on the left) who is an important character in *Famous Men* but is not present on any of the photographs included in the book.



Figure 4.3. Walker Evans, *The Burroughs Family*, Hale County, Alabama, 1936. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994.258.395.

²¹⁷ Lionel Trilling, “Review: Greatness with One Fault in It,” *The Kenyon Review* 4, no. 1 (1942): 100–01.

²¹⁸ Stott, *Thirties America*, 284.

The previous chapter showed that the expression of the subject is very important for social documentation. Evans took more than one image of each of the individual portraits and the selected images seem to greatly depend on it. As Stott notices, another photograph very similar to the one reproduced here was taken of Allie Mae. That photograph was published in Evans's *American Photographs*. Stott describes the expression of Annie Mae—as she is called in the book—in the photograph used in *Famous Men* (fig. 4.2) as “more acute, puzzled, and bitter.”²¹⁹ Indeed, the expression almost matches her husbands' on the opposite page and serves a better purpose for the documentary book than in the second portrait, in which she seems much more at ease with the camera, relaxed and happier. Trilling describes her face in the image from *Famous Men* as “a single concentrated phrase of suffering.”²²⁰ She nevertheless shows another sign, as Winfried Fluck sees it, that of “determination and readiness to endure.” As portrayed, she, in contrast to Migrant Mother, “does not ask for our compassion.”²²¹ Such reading of her face seems to be more in accordance with Evans and Agee's goal and experience, as they did not intend to portray them as victims.

That the subject's facial expression can decide between an image that works and one that does not, demonstrates another portrait of Lange's “Migrant Mother” (fig. 4.4). In this picture, Lange attempted to recreate the religious symbol of Madonna and child, as successfully did Riis with an Italian ragpicker (see fig. 2.3). According to Curtis, the image of nursing Madonna was often associated with the themes of “regeneration and renewal” that were popular at that time. He also adds that the mother's facial expression, “the key ingredient in a revealing portrait, was all wrong,” and Lange was aware of it.²²² Nevertheless, she achieved it in her best-known photograph from the series (see fig. 4.1) which is often associated with the image of Madonna and child. Agee, a Christian himself, uses the image of nursing Madonna towards the end of the book in his “descriptions of two images”—which seem to be experienced through his eyes only as they do not match any Evans's photographs. He describes Squinchy Gudger and his mother, sitting in a chair. Were the reader not to guess it himself,

²¹⁹ Stott, *Thirties America*, 277. Both images are reproduced side by side with other images in the middle of the book.

²²⁰ Trilling, “Review,” 100.

²²¹ Winfried Fluck, “Poor like Us: Poverty and Recognition in American Photography,” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 55, no. 1 (2010): 79.

²²² Curtis, “Dorothea Lange,” 10.

he clearly states near the end of the description that he sees “how against her body he is so many things in one, the child in the melodies of the womb, the Madonna’s son.”²²³



Figure 4.4. Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, Nipomo, Calif., 1936. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34-9097-C.

It was the end of the day and Lange spent only about ten minutes with the mother but that does not appear to be the reason why she did not ask the mother’s name. As Curtis suggests, she “remained nameless by design.” The FSA photographers were instructed in captioning their images following contemporary social-science techniques, which meant that the subjects photographed and interviewed remained anonymous. Thus, they became representatives of the common people FSA programs chose to help.²²⁴ Regarding the photographs in *Famous Men*, the first thing one would certainly include in the caption would be the names of the people. Perhaps Evans chose to let the reader first form an image of the sharecroppers as a part of a group of a much larger number of people who need their attention. The names—though they chose to use different names in the book to respect their privacy—are nevertheless revealed in

²²³ Agee and Evans, *Famous Men*, 442.

²²⁴ Curtis, “Dorothea Lange,” 4.

Agee's text. Agee's attempts to build relationships with them are illustrated throughout the book. I believe that the lack of names at the beginning emphasizes Agee's approach and simulates the same experience for the reader.

Peter Cosgrove commented on Agee's decision to change the names despite the presence of the photographs. "Only the complacency of the professional writer," he believes, "could lead someone to see the name as a more privileged identifying mark than the face."²²⁵ I must disagree, as it seems to be more complicated for the purposes of social documentation. I believe it is also important to mention that in the original manuscript, which was discovered decades after Agee's death and was published only recently (in 2013) as *Cotton Tenants: Three Families*, Agee uses the actual names of the tenants. As mentioned above, concealing a name of a person seems to allow them to hide in the crowd of their "kind." Would Riis's "Madonna" work if the caption revealed her name instead of just "an Italian ragpicker?" Jacob Riis did not use names in captions, neither did Jack London, except for one photograph. London reveals the name of his companion, Bert (see fig. 3.1), with whom he travels in disguise to pick hops and observe the hoppers. Therefore, not only does he immediately stand out of the crowd and distances himself from them, he also becomes familiar to the reader. You suddenly feel closer to him and seem to care more about his fate. He is not just a cobbler, he is Bert. Riis used a similar technique when he chose to present his pictures and invent stories about Tony. He needed to persuade the audience to help them and knew that once they know his name, they cannot escape the feeling of closeness that does not let them be indifferent.

²²⁵ Peter Cosgrove, "Snapshots of the Absolute: Mediamachia in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," *American Literature* 67, no. 2 (1995): 337.



Figure 4.5. Walker Evans, *Sharecropper Bud Fields and his family at home*. Hale County, Alabama, 1936. Library of Congress, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF342--T01-008147-A.

Regarding the photographs, even though the names of the people are revealed in the text, the reader is required to pay close attention to it to be able to link the characters to the images. That is even more difficult provided that first, one needs to match the family names. To reveal most of their identities, as Stott observes, one must read about 250 pages—slightly more than a half of Agee’s text. He also adds in parenthesis: “And when we know, how much more each picture means!”²²⁶ His need to emphasize the closeness he feels once he knows their names seems to prove what I suggested above. They are no longer people of the crowd, they are familiar individuals, humans as all of us are, who we had a privilege to meet through Agee and Evans’s experience. However, since the images lack captions and since we know that “none of the characters or incidents of this volume are fictitious” and thus “the names of most persons, and nearly all names of places, are altered,”²²⁷ their identities are partially left mysterious which

²²⁶ Stott, *Thirties America*, 278.

²²⁷ Agee and Evans, *Famous Men*, xxii.

allows the reader to imagine the Grudgers, the Ricketts and the Woods living in these conditions all over the country.

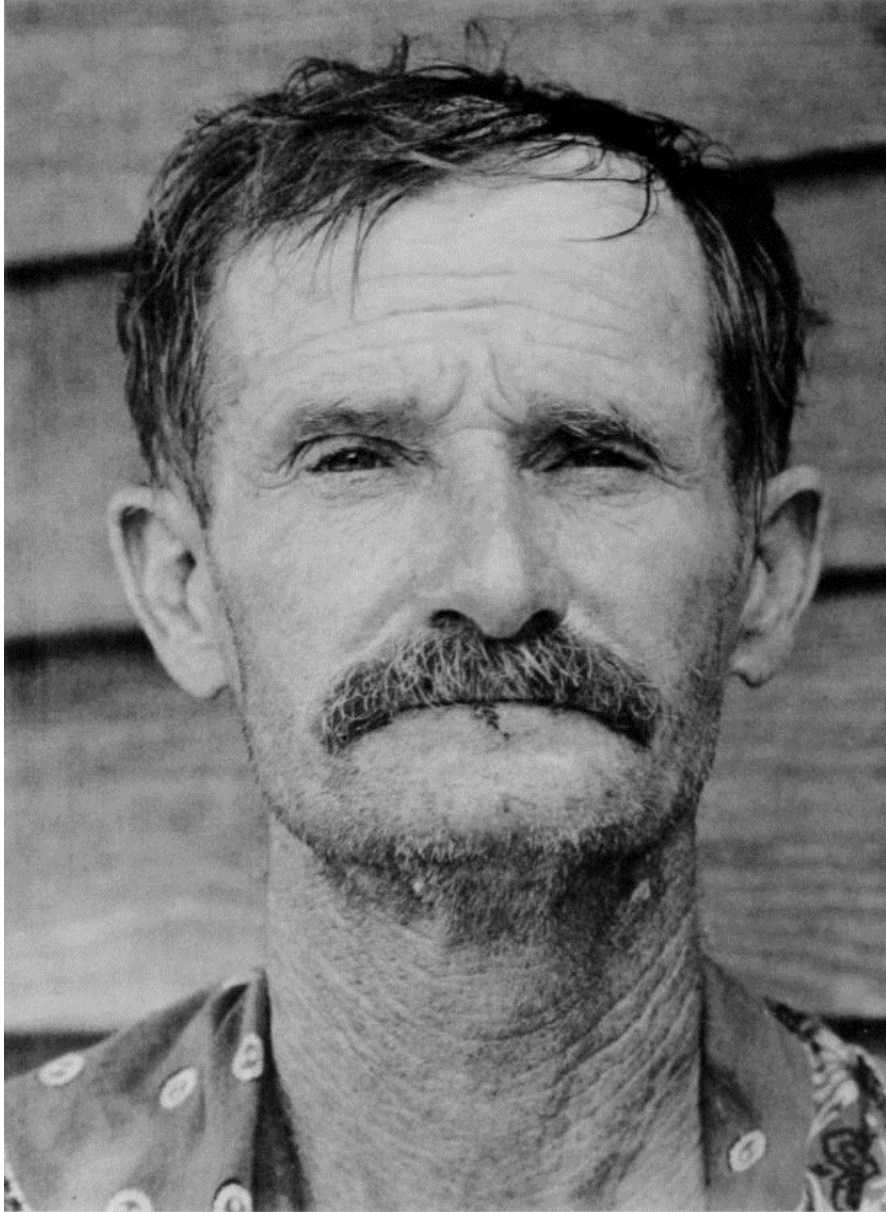


Figure 4.6. Walker Evans, Sharecropper (Bud Woods), Hale County, Alabama, 1936. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

Most of the individual portraits use the wooden wall of the house as a background (see figs. 4.2 and 4.6). This Evans's decision, according to Fluck, serves two purposes: "It supports [Allie Mae] in her confrontation with the camera (and hence with us), and, at the same time, it provides structural pattern in the mode of modernist functionalism that elevates her person by associating it with a simple but regular and therefore 'clean'

esthetic design.”²²⁸ As illustrated below, the esthetic design is especially important in Evans’s work.

Evans never identified himself with the goals of the FSA project. Regarding the work of Lewis Hine, he said: “I really don’t intend to have my ideas and my work and my vision used as political action.” As he insists, he also “never took it upon [him]self to change the world.”²²⁹ Both of these reasons freed him from any obligations and influences coming from the FSA or the magazine and left him free to focus on his vision of portraying the poverty of the families. As Stott illustrates, he chooses to hide aspects most associated with poverty that the reader of documentary literature expects:

He does not seek out, he in fact avoids, the spectacular, the odd, the piteous, the unseemly. Bud Woods’ skin cancer, the Rickettses’ “stinking beds,” the horde of flies on the tenants’ food and on their children’s faces—these he does not show, though Bourke-White and Russell Lee showed them. He shows instead Bud Woods with a bandanna on his shoulder covering his sores [see figs. 4.5 and 4.6], as one naturally would cover them from a stranger’s eyes; he shows the Gudgers’ neatly made bed; he shows an infant asleep beneath a flour sack to keep the flies off him. In short, he records people when they are most themselves, most in command, as they impose their will on their environment.²³⁰

Evans instead chose to find beauty in their lives and possessions. Evans took his documentary style seriously and did not believe in changing the scene in front of him, nor altering the print from the negative. As he claims, “you don’t touch a *thing*. You ‘manipulate,’ if you like, when you frame a picture—one foot one way or one foot another. But you’re not sticking anything in.”²³¹ Regarding the printing process, he states: “You can make a very false picture from a wonderful negative, or you can make a true one.”²³² Yet he was willing to sacrifice both beliefs to show the beauty he found in their homes.

²²⁸ Fluck, “Poor like Us,” 79.

²²⁹ “An Interview with Walker Evans: ‘The Thing Itself is Such a Secret and so Unapproachable’ (1974),” ASX, originally published in *Yale Alumni Magazine*, February, 1974, last modified in October 4, 2011, <https://www.americansuburbx.com/2011/10/interview-walker-evans-with-students.html>.

²³⁰ Stott, *Thirties America*, 269.

²³¹ *Ibid.* Italics in the original.

²³² ASX, “Walker Evans Pt. 1.”



Figure 4.7. Walker Evans, Part of the bedroom of Floyd Burroughs' cabin. Hale County, Alabama, 1936. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

To achieve the photograph of the “neatly made bed” Stott talks about (fig. 4.7), comparing the photograph to Agee’s description of the room, Curtis and Grannen suggest that he moved the bed from the corner, so it photographs better. Besides that, they believe that Evans increased the contrast while printing the negative, with which he effectively hid the dirt on the linen and achieved a clean look.²³³ The print in the Library of Congress FSA collection indeed reveals the dirt.

In an interview from 1971, Evans admitted that he “can’t stand a bad design or a bad object in a room.”²³⁴ Curtis and Grannen believe that Agee wrote his detailed descriptions of the house at the same time Evans took pictures of the house. The family was away, and Agee described the table that was set for dinner. As they point out, the picture of the dining room (fig. 4.8) shows that only the lamp remained on the table for aesthetic reasons. They also suggest that “the large crockery vessel” visible on the cupboard was added to the scene as Agee never mentioned it in the text, even though

²³³ Curtis and Grannen, “Famous Photographs,” 5.

²³⁴ ASX, “Walker Evans Pt. 1.”

he thoroughly described the cupboard and its contents. Such a valuable item, they believe, would not normally be “in such a precarious position.”²³⁵



Figure 4.8. Walker Evans, *Washstand in the dog run and kitchen of Floyd Burroughs' cabin*. Hale County, Alabama, 1936. Library of Congress, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF342-T01-008133.

Even though the text and the photographs are “coequal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative,” Agee repeatedly admits that the photographs are much better suited for their objective than words, as words are “the most inevitably inaccurate of all mediums of record and communication,” while the camera is “incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry truth.” “If I could do it,” he writes, “I’d do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates

²³⁵ Curtis and Grannen, “Famous Photographs,” 20.

of food and of excrement.” To achieve the truthful depiction of the place that he believed only the camera is available of, Agee describes all furniture and other objects in the house, as well as their position, with extreme use of detail. He opened everything there was to open and recorded the contents and counted the objects, going as far as counting the missing teeth on “a pink crescent celluloid comb.”²³⁶ His words, as far as the reader dares to trust them, recorded the home more objectively and with more detail than Evans’s photographs.

Agee’s descriptions of the objects also remind the reader that each one of them is important. Stott emphasizes the attraction of the “visibility of ‘simple people’” that Evans noticed and captured.²³⁷ All their possessions are seen as esthetic objects, not junk. Each of these items they need and use. What Evans achieved, as Stott sees it, was to avoid sentimental observations and instead to show “how much they possess,” “[suggesting] that all they touch, and all that touches them, is permeated with their being.” That is best illustrated on the piece of clothing, as Agee does with overalls:

The whole fabric is shrunken to size, which was bought large. The whole shape, texture, color, finally substance, all are changed. The shape, particularly along the urgent frontage of the thighs, so that the whole structure of the knee and musculature of the thigh is sculptured there; each man’s garment wearing the shape and beauty of his induplicable body. The texture and the color change in union, by sweat, sun, laundering, between the steady pressures of its use and age. [...] The middle-aged are fully soft and elegantly textured, and are lost out of all machinery into a full prime of nature. The mold of the body is fully taken, the seams are those of a living plant or animal.²³⁸

Evans did not document the tenants’ hard work Agee describes in length, except for two photographs added in the 1960 edition, a portrait of a man standing in a field and a photograph of a woman bent over in a field of cotton leaves—none of which come close to the evocation of hard labor. Evans was often criticized for not taking more images considering how long he stayed with them, as well as for ignoring some important aspects of their lives.²³⁹ However, the description of Gudger’s overalls reminds us of the work as much as Evans’s photograph of Gudger’s shoes (fig. 4.9) which was inspired by Van Gogh’s painting and which appeared in the second edition

²³⁶ Agee and Evans, *Famous Men*, xv, 236, 234, 13, 172.

²³⁷ Stott, *Thirties America*, 273–75.

²³⁸ Agee and Evans, *Famous Men*, 267–69.

²³⁹ See Curtis and Grannen, “Famous Photographs,” 11.

side by side with the photograph of the woman in the field. Gudger’s “specific human weight can be felt in those shoes,” comments Reed, “while at the same time we are made aware that our vision is being aesthetically directed by Evans.”²⁴⁰ To achieve his “aesthetic objectivism,” as Fluck calls it,²⁴¹ Evans clearly violated the standards of his documentary style. Nevertheless, he did not mean to mislead the reader, on the contrary, by showing beauty and order in their lives he challenged their views of poverty and still managed to record it as truthfully as possible.



Figure 4.9. Walker Evans, George Gudger’s shoes, Hale County, Alabama, 1936. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

Agee clearly had respect for six-years-older Evans and his craft. For him, Evans was in a position of a mentor and it was important for Agee to perceive the book as a collaboration. Not only did he ask him to edit his text, he also wanted to give him half the royalties—Evans insisted on a quarter.²⁴² Evans style of “detachment and record”²⁴³ left him keeping a much greater distance from the families than Agee did. Evans saw

²⁴⁰ Reed, “Unimagined Existence,” 165.

²⁴¹ Fluck, “Poor like Us,” 82.

²⁴² Stott, “Epilogue,” 170.

²⁴³ ASX, “Walker Evans (1971).”

the project as a job and approached it as a professional. Compared to Evans, Agee, in contrast, is an amateur, “playing the game for love.”²⁴⁴

Both Agee and Evans nevertheless worked to achieve the same purpose. Their commitment to the project was also largely influenced by the widespread perception of works of social documentation. Photographers worked to satisfy the public expectations to the detriment of their subjects which Agee and Evans attempted to challenge. Bourke-White and Caldwell’s *You Have Seen Their Faces*, published in 1937, was a very popular social documentary book. Bourke-White photographed people at their worst, several times at weird angles and with a flash that exaggerates her intrusion as well as their conditions. The images are captioned with quotes. However, the quotes are invented by the authors and, as Stott sees it, make the subjects look foolish and ignorant. Not only did both Evans and Agee condemn such exploitation, they were being mindful of avoiding it altogether. Agee even reprinted an article about Bourke-White in *Notes and Appendices*, “a gushy woman’s-page feature” which in the context of *Famous Men*, Stott believes, makes her appear “a spoiled insensitive ninny who stooped at nothing to get a sensationalistic picture that humiliated its subject.”²⁴⁵

In *Famous Men*, Agee states that “the governing instrument—which is also one of the centers of the subject—is individual, anti-authoritative human consciousness.”²⁴⁶ Indeed, we learn as much of Agee from the book as of the subject he treats. Agee attempts to objectively and truthfully describe what is happening not only around him but also in his mind. He even reveals his sexual desires and fantasies and shares them with the reader. By his attraction to the women, he once again challenged the reader’s preconceptions about poverty and “seriously [weakened] the idea that hardship is the *basic* fact of the victim’s life.”²⁴⁷ Shloss suggests that Evans’s style of capturing the portraits of the tenants, conversing with them and giving them time to prepare, showed Agee that art could be reciprocal and that somehow “self-exposure justified the exposure of others.”²⁴⁸ To use Stott’s language, Agee “strips himself to have the right to report their nakedness.”²⁴⁹ Regarding George Gudger, he writes:

²⁴⁴ Stott, “Epilogue,” 171.

²⁴⁵ Stott, *Thirties America*, 220–22.

²⁴⁶ Agee and Evans, *Famous Men*, xiv.

²⁴⁷ Stott, *Thirties America*, 302. Italics in the original.

²⁴⁸ Shloss, *In Visible Light*, 195.

²⁴⁹ Stott, *Thirties America*, 304.

I know him only so far as I know him, and only in those terms in which I know him; and all of that depends as fully on who I am as on who he is. I am confident of being able to get at a certain form of the truth about him, only if I am as faithful as possible to Gudger as I know him, to Gudger as, in his actual flesh and life (but there again always in my mind's and memory's eye) he is. [...] For that reason and for others, I would do just as badly to simplify or eliminate myself from this picture as to simplify or invent character, places or atmospheres. [...] The one deeply exciting thing to me about Gudger is that he is actual, he is living, at this instant. He is not some artist's or journalist's or propagandist's invention: he is a human being.²⁵⁰

Some critics believe, as Fluck illustrates, that Agee's fear of making the same mistake Bourke-White and Caldwell did prevented him from letting the characters speak for themselves which, contrary to Agee's attempts, offers only the representation of Gudger in his mind and thus keeps him in the realm of fiction.²⁵¹ From the very beginning, Agee attempted to bond with the family. In Evans's essay about Agee added in 1960 edition of *Famous Men*, he mentions that Agee wore cheap clothes "because he wanted to be able to forget them" and since he did not want to appear superior to them.²⁵² Evans mentioned in an interview that they paid the family for letting them stay there which "wasn't a corrupt gesture [but] it did make them feel a little bit ahead of the game." Agee also told them all about the project and "made them feel that they were participating," which was important for him.²⁵³

While Evans had the camera through which he communicated the experience, Agee had to rely on his senses. He describes fleeting moments that through his feelings and uneasiness seem to have a paramount importance in establishing relationships and in his struggle to do all he can to make them love him. In such situations, he frequently uses non-verbal contact, especially eye contact. Louise's gaze and his thinking process about whether he should smile at her represents such a passage: "I realize how likely she would be not to 'return' it, which, needing her liking so much, I could not bear, but because too I feel she is a long way above any such disrespect, and I want her respect also for myself." She finally lets her eyes relax away, he continues to watch her and when she looks at him again, he looks away "as if I were telling her, good god, if I have caused you any harm in this, if I have started within you any harmful change, if I have

²⁵⁰ Agee and Evans, *Famous Men*, 239–40.

²⁵¹ See Fluck, "Poor like Us," 88.

²⁵² Agee and Evans, *Famous Men*, ix, x.

²⁵³ ASX, "The Thing Itself."

so much as reached out to touch you in any way you should not be touched, forgive me if you can, despise me if you must, but in god's name feel no need to feel fear of me."²⁵⁴

As illustrated in this passage, Agee directly addresses the tenants in the text. He also addresses them by name, such as during a photo shoot on the front porch when he attempted to spread "so much quiet and casualness as [he] could":

It was you I was particularly watching, Mrs. Ricketts; [...] I was watching for your eyes [...] trying through my own and through a friendly and tender smiling (which sickens me to disgust to think of) to store into your eyes some knowledge of this, some warmth, some reassurance, that might at least a little relax you, that might conceivably bring you to warmth, to any ease or hope of smiling.²⁵⁵

The text reveals many times how dear the relationships were to Agee. One of the most touching moments, which also illustrates that his attempts were successful, is a moment of Emma's leaving the home for a new life with her husband they did not approve, giving her speech to him:

I want you and Mr. Walker to know how much we all like you, because you make us feel easy with you; we don't have to act any different from what it comes natural to act, and we don't have to worry what you're thinking about us, it's just like you was our own people and had always lived here with us.²⁵⁶

Describing his feelings at that moment, the passage illustrates that other times, Agee addresses the reader, switching between addressing the reader and the tenants freely in the book.

What's the use trying to say what I felt. [...] there she stood looking straight into my eyes, and I straight into hers, longer than you'd think it would be possible to stand it. I would have done anything in the world for her [...] I very strongly [...] wanted in answer to take her large body in my arms and smooth the damp hair back from her forehead and to kiss and comfort and shelter her like a child, and I can swear that I now as then almost believe that in that moment she would have so well understood this, and so purely and quietly met it, that now as then I only wish to God I had done it.²⁵⁷

In the following passage, Agee describes a moment in the car when their "flesh touched," they drew away, then relaxed and "lay quietly and closely side to side, and

²⁵⁴ Agee and Evans, *Famous Men*, 400–01.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 365.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 64–65.

intimately communicated also in [their] thoughts.”²⁵⁸ Such descriptions of intimacy between them hardly allow the reader to perceive Emma first and foremost as a victim of poverty. All this time, however, despite all his efforts, Agee cannot forget that his background limits his belonging there and understanding their lives, stating that “this was my right home, right earth, right blood, to which I would never have true right.”²⁵⁹

The form of the book resembles Agee’s consciousness as he does not follow a chronological order. His “intimacy” with the tenants begins through a shared moment of his arrival before bedtime when he ate his first meal in their home. He ate more than he could hold as to ensure he would not appear “superior” to them. This moment, as a flashback, Agee shares with the reader towards the end of the book.²⁶⁰ The structure, challenging the tradition of the documentary genre, was, as Stott suggests, drafted on a piece of paper on the spur of the moment.²⁶¹ The arrows visible on the paper reproduced in Stott’s work suggest a frame built from the sections called “On the Porch,” first of which is at the beginning of the book, second in the middle and the third at the very end. In the preface he advised the reader to proceed to “the book-proper,” after the first section, and return later, not being clear about where does “the book-proper” begin.²⁶² After he mentions that the last words had been spoken, descriptions of two images, Notes and Appendices and the final section of him and Evans on the porch follow. The very last words of the book are then as follows:

Our talk drained rather quickly off into silence and we lay thinking, analyzing, remembering, in the human and artist’s sense praying, chiefly over matters of the present and of that immediate past which was a part of the present; and each of these matters had in that time the extreme clearness, and edge, and honor, which I shall now try to give you; until at length we too fell asleep.²⁶³

He mentions several times in the book that his explanation and description of the events “must fail.”²⁶⁴ This failure of his confession is further emphasized by the ending. When he finally sees it clearly and he is about to communicate it to the reader, the book ends. As Trilling sees it, “failure alone can express the inexpressibleness of his

²⁵⁸ Agee and Evans, *Famous Men*, 66.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 415.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 413–17.

²⁶¹ Stott, *Thirties America*, 310.

²⁶² Agee and Evans, *Famous Men*, xiii.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 470–71.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 299.

matter.”²⁶⁵ Agee’s relationship with the families is essential to him as it is to the work itself. Although, as suggested above, the book is designed to allow the readers to build the relationship with the families themselves, Reed states that the end reminds the readers that their relationship with the tenants is at the very beginning.²⁶⁶

What we are left with in the end, Cosgrove concludes, is “a chunk of actual experience.”²⁶⁷ Agee and Evans showed the documentarists that breaking the rules, risking a failure and providing a point of view readers may not be prepared to accept, might actually result in an even more truthful social documentation that reveals itself through the actual experience without the need of exploitation of the subjects.

²⁶⁵ Trilling, “Review,” 101.

²⁶⁶ Reed, “Unimagined Existence,” 169.

²⁶⁷ Cosgrove, “Snapshots,” 335.

Conclusion

Poverty is a serious, unending problem every generation must face and fight. People have grown quite accustomed to photographs depicting poverty and other social issues, they are, however, still more reliable than words when it comes to an accurate depiction of reality and represent a powerful tool for conveying a message to masses with the hope of changing the conditions of the subjects. Any manipulation with photographs or other violation of the ethical standards is much easier to reveal these days and also bear serious consequences. It was, however, not always so. It also does not mean that present-day photographers do not use the techniques described in this thesis to shape the audience's interpretation of the images.

I hope I have demonstrated that the images in the social documentary literature elevate its meaning and documentary worth and that they depend on the surrounding text and other indications of the author for the correct—or rather the intended—interpretation. Moreover, the reader should be able to view the early works of social documentation critically and be mindful of the techniques I have illustrated here that documentarists use to their advantage but, certainly, with good intentions. No matter how objective they attempt to be, their views and personal aspirations, as well as values and opinions characteristic for the society at the time of their lives, do, to some extent, influence their work.

Jacob Riis's approach was greatly influenced by his time. Many people believed that the underprivileged were responsible for their conditions, perceiving it as a result of either biology or a moral stigma. Riis used his imagery to shake this belief, providing evidence of the destructive powers of their environment and making the upper classes feel sympathy and guilt. Religious symbolism and careful composition of his photographs demonstrate his skills and careful attention to the craft, even though he considered himself an amateur. To succeed, he included fear of their possible rebellion and emphasized the threat that lingers so close to the homes of his audience. Many critics condemned his exploitative practices which seem to ignore the wishes and views of his subjects and prefer the result of his efforts over the methods selected to achieve it. Some of the practices, such as his intrusive use of flash, need to be perceived in relation to the development of photography at his time. His photographs, as well as his text, also reveal stereotyping and prejudices of the then society he failed to avoid.

Jack London's approach was in many ways influenced by Riis's and other earlier works of social documentation. Neither Riis nor London chose photography to be their profession, yet, both were aware of its potential. In comparison with Riis, London can hardly be seen as a social reformer. His work largely depended on his immediate experience with the slum and its inhabitants and the visibility of the effect it had upon him. Despite the critique of his racist views, which were then common among the intellectuals and which he projected into his descriptions of the people, London depicted daily struggles of the underprivileged through his interactions with them. Unlike Riis, he managed to familiarize the reader with their views of poverty which, in some passages, demonstrate their hopelessness and inability to fight for their rights, which Hine and others attempted to change. London's aim was to describe what he saw without a demand for change, even though the text and his message to the reader reveal his interest in their future. London's imagery illustrates an imbalance in terms of the message it conveys. London's first-hand experiences greatly contributed to the value of the work, nevertheless, his obvious effort to shape the interpretation of his photographs to his reality weaken their value as evidence to the text, resulting in a counterproductive effect.

The 1930s, due to the emergence of the photo-essay and the Great Depression, meant a boom for social documentary photography and photojournalism. The power of photographs to stand as arguments on their own, without captions, was emphasized in Agee and Evans's work, although Agee's text to some extent replaces them. While London and Riis documented poverty in the cities, very close to the readers, Agee and Evans observed poverty that was distant and did not represent an immediate threat to them. Even though the documentary literature popular at that time exploited the subjects and delivered what readers expected from the tradition of social documentation, Evans and Agee chose a different approach. The influence of the views of American society at the time of their project is visible in their work as well. Unlike Riis and London, however, they seem to be conscious of their negative effect and attempt to correct them. While Evans's photographs depict the poverty the families live in, they do not deprive the subjects of their dignity and, moreover, show their strength and resolution to endure. Evans's failure to resist breaking his rules of the documentary style to emphasize their artistic quality contributed to his message that the poor are equal to the fortunate and have beauty in their lives as well. Agee's intimacy with the subjects further challenged

the readers' views of social victims. Riis achieved sympathy of his audience through the portrayal of his subjects in a certain way, using religious symbols, while Evans and Agee were as successful with their focus on their humanity.

The ethical standards I mentioned at the beginning, as well as the focus on objectivity throughout the text, might seem that to accurately document the subject at hand, photographers need to set their creative impulses aside. I hope that the thesis proved the contrary. It is precisely the mixture of the vision of the photographers, their personal values and identification with the ethical standards that, with an honest approach as illustrated in *Famous Men*, provide the best combination for accurate social documentation.

Frequently, as illustrated in the thesis, it is the use of the photographs that decides whether they tell the truth. I believe that the present-day reader will not need to be convinced that photographs—or rather the people behind them—might lie, whatever the reason may be. However, I hope that the thesis demonstrated that the process of photographing, as well as the interpretation of the images, is unavoidably subjective and these apparent “lies” that others perceive are not meant to be harmful. Furthermore, they might not even be intentional, as they represent the reality which the photographer sees. Nonetheless, at a time when we are daily surrounded by a massive number of photographs presented as evidence of “truths” that may have an immense impact on, due to technological advances, millions of people, it is beneficial to be reminded and mindful of all the forces and various personal beliefs that may be part of the message.

Resumé

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá počátky sociální dokumentární fotografie na konci devatenáctého století a jejím vývojem v první polovině dvacátého století. Na fotografii je nahlíženo jako na nástroj pro zlepšení sociálních podmínek, jak je využívali dokumentární fotografové zabývající se sociálními problémy ve společnosti. Práce se zaměřuje na fotografie použité v dokumentární literatuře, v níž slouží především jako důkaz pravdivosti textu. V neposlední řadě také sociální fotografie znamenala nový a věrohodnější způsob, jak zprostředkovat skutečné a mnohdy těžko uvěřitelné životní podmínky chudých. Práce si kladla za cíl zjistit, jakým způsobem dokumentaristé využívali fotografie ve svých dílech zabývajících se sociálními problémy, aby tak přispěly zamýšlenému účelu a napomohly dosáhnout požadované změny. Dílčím cílem bylo odhalení různých způsobů, kterými tito autoři fotografie začlenili do textu a jimiž se snažili ovlivnit interpretaci fotografií dle svých záměrů.

Pro účely práce byla vybrána tři díla z různých období, která ilustrují vývoj sociální dokumentární fotografie a její přínos pro dokumentární literaturu. První z nich je kniha *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). Jejím autorem je Jacob A. Riis, jenž je považován za jednoho z prvních dokumentaristů zabývajících se sociální fotografií. Druhou knihou, vydanou v roce 1903, je dílo Jacka Londona, *The People of the Abyss* (vydané v českém překladu jako *Lidé z propasti*). Přestože Jack London nebývá zařazován mezi dokumentární fotografy, uvedené dílo bylo značně inspirováno dokumentární literaturou, a je tak dle mého názoru vhodné jej za jejího představitele považovat. Poslední dílo, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, vychází ze spolupráce spisovatele Jamese Ageeho a fotografa Walkera Evanse. Kniha vyšla v roce 1941, její obsah nicméně vrací čtenáře do roku 1936 a představuje tak velkou hospodářskou krizi 30. let a její důsledky. Tato práce také zasazuje jmenovaná díla do kontextu dané doby. Při analýze jednotlivých knih je kladen důraz na osobnost autorů, jejich život, postoje a hodnoty, jež mohou být značně ovlivněny dobou, v níž žili.

V průběhu devatenáctého století se fotografové zaměřili na některé sociální problémy především v rámci dokumentování lidí a tradic, aby je tak zachovali pro budoucí generace. Zejména fotografie hladomoru se také začaly objevovat u fotografů, kteří dokumentovali svět na svých cestách. Tito fotografové se svými snímky nicméně nesnažili o změnu. V 90. letech devatenáctého století se začaly objevovat takzvané

„před a po“ snímky, jež využívaly především nově vznikající charitativní instituce, aby tak doložily účinnost svých programů.

Jedním z prvních, kteří začali využívat fotografie za účelem sociální reformy, byl Jacob Riis. Jeho zkušenosti se životem chudých, jenž si sám vyzkoušel v jednadvaceti letech po emigraci do USA v roce 1870, mu napomohly v pozdějším boji proti životním podmínkám v chudinských čtvrtích New Yorku. Neméně důležité byly jeho zkušenosti se slumy v souvislosti s jeho profesí policejního reportéra. Mnoho lidí tehdy věřilo, že si chudí za své postavení ve společnosti a podmínky, ve kterých žijí, mohou sami. Mezi důvody patřilo často morální stigma. Riis měl díky technologickému pokroku možnost použít k fotografování blesk a zdokumentovat tak prostředí, ve kterém chudí žili, a to i v noci. Ve svých fotografiích navíc využíval náboženských symbolů, jimiž se snažil přesvědčení svého publika změnit a vzbudit v nich pocit soucitu a viny. Přestože se Riis snažil o změnu některých názorů společnosti na chudé a jejich situaci, v jeho textech a fotografiích se objevují předsudky tehdejší doby.

Ačkoliv byl Riis zejména reportérem a považoval se pouze za amatérského fotografa, jeho promyšlené kompozice snímků a uspořádání objektů tak, aby vytvořily náboženskou symboliku, naznačují zvládnutí fotografického řemesla. Aby mohl svému publiku zprostředkovat realitu, fotil Riis v činžovních domech v noci a oslňoval spící lidi bleskem. Je ovšem nutné nazírat na jeho postupy v souvislosti s tehdejší dostupnou technikou. Lidé z vyšších vrstev, na něž byly jeho přednášky s projekcí fotografií zaměřeny, byli jeho snímky šokováni. Pro ujištění, že jeho přednášky a knihy dosáhnou požadovaného efektu, naznačil Riis hrozbu, kterou chudí představují, pokud se rozhodnou vzbouřit.

Jeho hlavním cílem bylo zlepšit životní podmínky chudých, což pro něj znamenalo zbourání starých činžovních domů. Za jeho přístup, jenž upřednostňoval cíle před metodami a mnohdy nezohledňoval pohled a názory chudých, byl často kritizován. Riis se se svým úsilím nicméně zasloužil o zničení několika starých činžovních domů a výstavbu parků, výrazně ovlivnil dění v New Yorku i mimo něj a v neposlední řadě svou prací také významně přispěl k vytvoření fondů a zákonů zlepšujících životní podmínky chudiny.

Slumy podobné těm v New Yorku bylo ovšem možné najít i v dalších městech nejen v Americe. Situaci v Londýně na přelomu století zdokumentoval Jack London

ve své knize *Lidé z propasti*. London byl nejen spisovatelem, ale i vášnivým fotografem. V Londýně strávil několik týdnů, během kterých žil v převleku mezi chudými a poznal tak jejich každodenní problémy. Jeho dílo bylo ovlivněno předchozími reportážemi ze slumů, včetně té od Riise. Vyniká především jeho zkušenostmi z první ruky a zprostředkováním pohledu chudých. Byl kritizován zejména za jeho styl psaní, který odkrývá jeho příběhy a pocity v Londýně ve stejné míře jako chudých, a je tak podle některých příliš subjektivní.

London ilustruje bezmocnost chudých a jejich každodenní boj o obživu a místo na spaní, který jim nedává prostor ke snaze o zlepšení jejich situace. Přestože se London přímo nesnažil svým dílem o změnu, vybízel své čtenáře k soucitu s nimi. Stejně jako Riis, London svým textem a fotografiemi ukázal temnou stránku jejich života, především pokud jde o nedostatek základních potřeb jako jsou jídlo a spánek. Na rozdíl od Riise ovšem zahrnul do svého díla i fotografie, které jsou v kontrastu s vážností okolního textu. Lidé na nich vyobrazení se usmívají, fotografie nejsou v souladu s dojmem, jenž se London snaží vyvolat okolním textem, a v důsledku tak působí kontraproduktivně. London často popisuje příběhy, které mají přítomností fotografií a jejich popisků shodujících se s okolním textem vyvolat ve čtenáři pocit, že odkazují na skutečnost zachycenou na fotografiích. V mnoha případech jde ale o fotografie pořízené za jiných okolností. Jeho zjevná snaha o ovlivnění čtení jeho fotografií, jenž v některých případech působí jako důkaz spíše zpochybňující jeho text, tak snižuje jejich význam.

Vývoj sociální dokumentární fotografie v první polovině dvacátého století byl v Evropě ovlivněn politickým děním, které v některých zemích, například v Německu, výrazně limitovalo možnosti fotografů. Významné bylo především hnutí, které prostřednictvím fotografií podporovalo pracovní sílu a snažilo se o její zapojení do boje pro lepší pracovní podmínky. Také v USA ubývalo děl zabývajících se sociálními problémy, které fotografové, zejména Lewis Hine, dokumentovali především prostřednictvím portrétů. Situace se nicméně změnila v 30. letech s příchodem světové hospodářské krize. Ta spolu s technologickým pokrokem, a tak i stále více oblíbenější formou sdělování informací pomocí fotoesejí, znamenala prudký vzestup fotožurnalismu, ale také sociální dokumentární fotografie.

Krise 30. let si v USA vyžádala vládní programy podpory. Roy Stryker byl pověřen dokumentací efektivnosti těchto programů prostřednictvím fotografií, které byly stále více uznávány jako věrohodnější zdroj než pouhý text. Stryker věřil, že lidé podpoří tyto programy pouze za předpokladu, že budou jejich fotografie co nejméně nejvěrohodnější. Za tímto účelem tak zavedl pravidla, jež museli jeho fotografové respektovat. Mezi nimi byl například zákaz ovlivňovat lidi, které fotografovali, a zasahovat do situace, kterou dokumentovali. Platil také zákaz manipulovat s fotografiemi při jejich vyvolávání. Na fotografie bylo nicméně nahlíženo jako na kreativní osobnosti, kteří přistupují ke svým úkolům po svém. Právě tato pravidla, jež byla poprvé vyžadována institucí v rámci její oficiální politiky, napomohla ke vzniku dokumentární tradice a standardům, které se v určité podobě dodržují dodnes.

Posilující role fotografií a rovnocennost mezi nimi a textem byla nejvíce zvýrazněna v díle spisovatele Jamese Ageeho a fotografa Walkera Evanse. Přestože populární díla tohoto období stále tradičně kombinují fotografie s textem, všechny snímky Evanse jsou v knize *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* uvedeny na začátku, bez popisků, které v podstatě nahrazuje následující text od Ageeho. Na rozdíl od Londona a Riise se tito autoři věnovali problémům, které byly vzdálené a nepředstavovaly tak okamžitou hrozbu pro jejich čtenáře. Dokumentaristé 30. let se nicméně stejně jako London a Riis zaměřovali na zprostředkování bídy a všeho, co přináší. Autoři nejpopulárnějšího díla zaměřeného na důsledky krize, Erskine Caldwell a Margaret Bourke-White, ukazují chudé farmáře a jejich živobytí s důrazem na špínu, nehygieničnost jejich příbytků i jejich samotný vzhled, včetně kožních problémů a jiných viditelných důsledků tvrdé práce na jejich těle. K fotografiím navíc přidali vymyšlené věty, které působí jako citace lidí na nich zobrazených a jež jsou často nevhodné a ponižující. Agee a Evans tyto praktiky kritizovali a pro svůj projekt zvolili velice odlišný přístup.

Fotografie rodin, s nimiž Agee a Evans několik týdnů žili, zachycují jejich příbytky a vlastnictví jako estetické objekty. Každý z nich má svůj účel a využití. Podobně jako jejich oblečení, každý z nich se opotřebovává používáním, jak popisuje i Agee ve svém textu. Portréty členů rodiny jsou foceny z přirozeného úhlu. Evans, i díky technice, kterou používá, dal portrétovaným osobám čas na přípravu na focení. Výsledné portréty tak nepřipravují osoby o jejich důstojnost. Dřevěná stěna jejich domu, použitá jako pozadí, pak zdůrazňuje jejich odhodlanost vydržet a vypořádat

se s těmito podmínkami. Evans se tak soustředuje spíše na krásu prostředí, ve kterém žijí, a jejich sílu, než na často zobrazovanou odstrašující bídu a bezmocnost.

K tomu, aby Evans dosáhl svých cílů, musel porušit své vlastní zásady a při focení interiérů přemístil předměty pro větší estetičnost. Byl si ovšem vědom toho, že zobrazuje chudobu a jeho dílo to musí dát najevo. Proto také nejspíše nezařadil do výběru fotografie, na kterých jsou členové rodiny ve svém nedělním oděvu a vypadají spokojeně. Text Ageeho, jenž je plný jeho myšlenkových pochodů a pocitů, se soustředí na vyobrazení rodin skrze jeho blízkého vztahu s nimi a důrazem na jejich lidskost. Osobním vztahem se členy rodiny a důrazem na jejich sexualitu tak výrazně zpochybnil nahlížení na ně především jako na oběti bídy.

I přes odlišné názory a postupy byl každý z těchto autorů nepochybně přesvědčen o svém jednání pro dobro chudiny. Riis se snažil působit na své čtenáře a pro tyto účely vybral fotografie, které jeho text a záměr podpořily. Zdůrazňoval především nelidskost prostředí chudinských čtvrtí a neschopnost těchto lidí zlepšit svou situaci bez pomoci ostatních. London, značně ovlivněn šokem ze svého pozorování, který ovlivnil i jeho vyprávění, Riise v mnohém následoval. Zaměřil se na zprostředkování životních podmínek chudých zejména prostřednictvím jeho vlastní zkušenosti s nimi. Na rozdíl od Riise tak věnoval mnohem více prostoru příběhům chudých a jejich pohledu na tehdejší společnost a vybízel čtenáře k soucitu s nimi. Dílo Ageeho a Evanse se liší již tím, že se zaměřuje pouze na tři rodiny a nepopisuje situaci chudých v širším měřítku. Přestože se jejich kniha ve společnosti neuchytila v době jejího vydání, jejich přístup ke zprostředkování chudoby ukázal nový způsob dokumentace založený na spolupráci s jejími oběťmi a vzájemném respektu. Pozdější popularita a vliv jejich díla v 60. letech prokázaly účinnost této metody a zasloužily se o zařazení *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* mezi klasická díla nejen dokumentární literatury.

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Annotation

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Title of the thesis: A Focus on Reality: The Development of Social Documentary Photography and Its Importance for Documentary Literature

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The thesis looks at social documentary photography from its beginnings at the end of the nineteenth century to its later development throughout the first half of the twentieth century. It focuses on its role in documentary literature, in which it mainly serves as evidence to the text and provides a more truthful depiction of reality. It studies and compares three works, Jacob A. Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*, Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* and James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. It emphasizes the personal approach of these authors and the techniques they used for incorporating the images into the text of their works.

Anotace

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Název práce: Zaměřeno na realitu: počátky sociální dokumentární fotografie a její význam pro dokumentární literaturu

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Klíčová slova: Jacob Riis, Jack London, James Agee, Walker Evans, dokumentární fotografie, dokumentární literatura, fotografická interpretace, sociální problémy, chudoba

Tato práce se zabývá sociální dokumentární fotografií od jejího počátku na konci devatenáctého století po její vývoj v první polovině dvacátého století. Zkoumá využití a význam těchto fotografií v dokumentární literatuře, jenž spočívá především v potvrzení pravdivosti uvedených tvrzení a věrohodnějším zprostředkování chudoby. Pro tento účel se práce zaměřuje na knihy *How the Other Half Lives* od Jacoba A. Riise, *The People of the Abyss* Jacka Londona a *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* Jamese Ageeho a Walkera Evanse. Práce zdůrazňuje osobitý přístup těchto autorů a způsoby, jimiž snímky začlenili do textu svých děl.