

## UWP Instructor Application 2011-2012

### Sample Student Draft

**Directions:** Imagine that you are teaching a class in academic writing for first-year college students. In your class, drafts are not graded. Instead, you give students feedback and allow them to revise their essays before submitting them for grades. In response to your first essay assignment (given below), you have received the following draft from Jane X., one of your students. Write a brief end comment (250 words max.) in which you offer advice to Jane about how she might revise his essay. You do not need to submit a marked version of the sample student paper itself. We will be considering only your end comment.

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**Assignment:** Write a 1500-2000 word essay in which you use an article such as Susan Sontag's "Looking at War" as a theoretical lens to analyze and interpret a text of your choosing.

[see below]

Jane X.  
University Writing

### What is a Name?

The image titled the “Destitute Pea Picker in California” was taken in 1936 during the Great Depression. In this image there is a woman sitting in the center of the photo with her chin slightly resting in her hand and a very ponderous look on her face. She shows signs of deep distraught through her sad eyes and deep wrinkles in her forehead. On both of her sides are two small children with their faces hidden from view and an infant nestled in her lap. With their clothes appearing to be slightly tattered, they all look as though they hadn’t had a proper bath or a decent meal in quite some time.

This image invoked an emotional response from within me and raised some questions; what caused her destitute situation? What happened to her since this photo? And I think most important; who was this woman and what was her story? Without knowing much more about the image or its subject I thought to investigate further into the history of this photo. My search has led me to the discovery that the image is a rather well known iconic photo from the time period.

Equipped now with this knowledge I began to understand what Susan Sontag was trying to convey in portions of her essay “Looking at War”, as she writes about the correlation between the effects of images and photojournalism, in particular images of war and images of suffering and the aesthetic of the medium. Although Sontag focuses her essay on images of war there is a similarity to the suffering that is portrayed in war photos and the image of the woman. Sontag writes “The iconography of suffering has a long pedigree” and she goes on to say, “the suffering most often worthy of representation is that which is understood to be the product of wrath, divine or human.”

(88) Images are used to help convey a message that corresponds to the story being told, but much too often the message, itself, tends to vanish leaving only the images. In some of these cases, like that of the “Destitute Pea Picker in California”, the images become iconic photos.

Sontag writes about the transformation that takes place when an image becomes just that, an image. She states, “Transforming is what art does, but photography that bears witness to the calamitous and the reprehensible is much criticized if it seems “aesthetic”; that is, too much like art. The dual powers of photography [are] to generate documents and to create works of art... Photographs that depict suffering shouldn’t be beautiful, as captions shouldn’t moralize. In this view, a beautiful photograph drains attention from the sobering subject and turns it toward the medium itself, inviting the viewer to look “aesthetically,” and thereby compromising the picture’s status as a document.”(94) Like many images of war, the image of the woman is aesthetically pleasing to look at. Essentially, if the image is portrayed more artistically the message may be diluted and the overall power of the message lost on the reader.

The representation of how an image is depicted tends to be where a particular story being told can get short-sighted, and there remains an inevitable anonymity of the person or persons in the image. In her essay Sontag briefly introduces “a photographer who specializes in world misery,” Sebastião Salgado, and a particular exhibit he had put together called “Migrations: Humanity in Transition.” Salgado was highly criticized for his exhibition which consisted of “beautifully composed big pictures that are said to be ‘cinematic’.” Sontag writes “But the problem is in the pictures themselves, not the way they are exhibited: in their focus on the powerless, reduced to their powerlessness. It is significant that the powerless are not named in the captions. A portrait that declines to name its subject becomes complicit, if inadvertently, in the cult of celebrity that has fuelled an insatiable appetite for the opposite sort of photograph: to grant only the famous their

names demotes the rest to representative instances of their occupations, their ethnicities, their plights.” (94) The image of the “Destitute Pea Picker in California” was taken by Dorothea Lange, and like Salgado, she too attached no name to the photo. With the details of her identity missing, the photographer is discounting the true existence of the woman, her story, her suffering, her plight.

The image, which over time “has become known as ‘Migrant Mother,’” (The Library of Congress) is of Florence Owens Thompson. She was originally from Oklahoma and had moved to California in 1924 with her husband and, at the time, three children. They had set out to “give [her children] more than she had had [and] to live the American dream.”(Sprague, Sr.) After the Wall Street Crash of 1929, “the Great Depression moved across the land, little would remain as it had been.”(Sprague, Sr.) Her husband had lost his job at a mill and they, like many people at that time, had gone to work on farms and in orchards. It was not long after that when her husband had passed away leaving her, now, with five children and one on the way. Thompson and her family migrated from farm to farm staying in tented camps with other workers. It was when she was in transition to another camp that marked the fateful day that her image would become an iconic photo to be forever associated with the suffering of the Great Depression.

As the story goes Lange was working at the time for the Farm Security Administration as a photojournalist. While driving down the road she stopped after spotting Thompson, who had set up her tent near the edge of the road and waited for the rest of her family to join her. It was then that Lange captured the image that would bring her so much fame. Years later, in 1960, Lange had written about the photo for the magazine *Popular Photography*, she wrote “I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five

exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it.” (The Library of Congress) The problem with Lange’s account is there was nothing equal about their meeting. Thompson never did receive any help from the photo.

Although Thompson was experiencing hard times when the photo was taken she had been reported to say that she resented the photo and the image of despair it depicts. “Thompson was an active participant in farm labor struggles in the 1930’s, occasionally serving as an organizer. Her daughter later commented, ‘She was a very strong woman. She was a leader. I think that’s one of the reasons she resented the photo—because it didn’t show her in that light.’” (The Library of Congress)

Sontag writes in her essay that “Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it...or those who could learn from it.”(89) I believe this statement should be taken further to say it is the “right” on the part of the photographer to help “alleviate” their subjects suffering and their responsibility to tell the truth so that others “could learn from it.” There is something so flawed with the dismissal of accountability that should be an intrinsic part of photojournalism. Lange’s blatant misrepresentation of Thompson and use of her image for personal gain is appalling, just as appalling as only looking at the image for the aesthetic of the medium. Sontag writes “to find beauty in war photographs seems heartless.”(93), but even though the photo is not one of war I feel

it is just as “heartless” to find beauty in it, in someone’s suffering. When I first saw the image of the “Destitute Pea Picker in California” it drew me in and spoke to me, because of her deep sad eyes and for the aesthetic beauty of the photo. The image, itself, is black and white with bold crisp tonality and looks very artistic, as though she had posed for it in a photo shoot. Having not seen the photo before nor knowing the history behind it, I now feel that I have done injustice to the woman in the photograph through my ignorance.

But do we learn anything from images? With the long history of photojournalism and images of suffering have we become so numb to them? Sontag writes “...that while an event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it would have been if one had never seen the photographs, after repeated exposure it also becomes less real.”(96) I have to wonder how much truth there is to that statement. There is no doubt that if I had never seen the image of the woman that she was still real. She also writes “Photographs tend to transform, whatever their subject, and as an image something may be beautiful—or terrifying, or unbearable, or quite bearable—as it is not in real life.” (94) Is it not “real life”, or better yet when did it stop being “real life”? There seems to be something inherently wrong with reducing someone’s suffering and their reality to a mere image. I believe we should ask ourselves this question as even today we are still inundated with images of war and suffering. Should this mean that war and suffering of human beings does not exist with the overexposure of images? Sontag also writes “The problem is not that people remember through photographs but that they remember only the photographs. This remembering through photographs eclipses other forms of understanding—and remembering.”(94) I believe that we should be held accountable for these “other forms of understanding” and take responsibility for our own naivety. Remembering an image is just not

enough.

Work cited:

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