

PEERING INTO PEOPLE:
THE INFLUENCE OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN AMERICAN REALISM AND NATURALISM

Katherine Starr

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Dr. Kathryn Wichelns

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On first seeing a photograph in about 1840 French painter Paul Delaroche is said to have exclaimed, "From today, painting is dead!"¹ Thankfully, that was not the case, but photography, which initially was highly imitative of painting, did change painting. The ability of photography to record the finest, intricate details directed painters away from perfection of representation toward increasingly abstract forms of expression. The advent of photography also influenced the literary arts, directly, as a cultural influence, and indirectly, through painting. As scholar Peter Brooks says, "It is not coincidental that photography comes into being along with realism."² In *Realist Vision* Brooks examines the realist movement in art and literature, recognizing that photography plays a role in the evolution of realism, chiefly regarding painting. Victorian literature scholar Daniel A. Novak explores in depth the relationship between photography and British realist literature and the relevant scholarship, but American literature is mostly absent from the analysis. The influence of American photography on American literature is largely unexplored. I think the affect photography had on the realism and naturalism movements in American literature, particularly the work of Matthew Brady and Jacob Riis, is worthy of analysis. Brady and Riis serve as dual anchors whose careers roughly demarcate the period of American literature considered here, and while some consideration is given to them individually, they are used here as broad representatives of the type of photographic work associated with them.

We live in a world so inundated with photographic images it is hard to imagine life without them. Within seconds we can capture pictures, soften, resize, remove blemishes, filter, enhance and broadcast worldwide to as large an audience as we can cultivate. It's the twenty-first

¹ Barnes Foundation. "From Today, Painting Is Dead: Early Photography in Britain and France." www.barnesfoundation.org/whats-on/early-photography. (Accessed April 21, 2019).

² Peter Brooks. *Realist Vision*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). 3.

century version of the *carte de visite*. To cast ourselves back to a time before photography might feel like a partial vision loss. Perhaps, though, eyes and memory worked harder to appreciate and preserve, just as ears and memory may have been sharper before the widespread use of the printed word. We recognize the impact of the printed word and the invention of the printing press as one of the single-most culture-changing revolutions in all of human history.

Photography has not brought a means of communication as easily tracked and measured as literacy rates, but it has nonetheless changed the world—or at least changed the way we see the world, and the way we see ourselves.

The nineteenth century was a time of monumental change. The United States was nearly torn asunder by the brutal, fratricidal Civil War. We tend to view the twentieth century as *the* time of rapid and spectacular change. After all, barely fifty years after automobiles roar past horses, we land a rocket on the moon. Computers, cell phones and the internet opened up global communications with astonishing speed. By twenty-first century standards, the nineteenth century can seem quaint; a time of horses and carriages, corsets and full dresses, letter-writing and formal manners that now seem so stuffy. The reality is that the nineteenth century was tumultuous; a revolutionary time of miraculous technological advances and groundbreaking scientific discoveries, like Darwin's theory of natural selection. It was a time that required people to reconsider everything they thought was true; where what appeared to be magic was true and what we thought was true was mythical. Until the steam powered locomotive, no one had ever traveled upon land faster than a horse can run. Until the telegraph no one had ever sent a message faster than a horse can run (except perhaps the limited use of birds to relay messages). The steam engine, the cotton gin, and the internal combustion engine reshaped manufacturing, which in turn redistributed human populations from rural to urban. Incandescent lighting

transformed cities into bustling, humming hives that never slept. The progress of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries mostly rides on the momentous strides of the nineteenth century.

The nineteenth century was also a time of social upheaval. The seeds of suffrage for blacks and women took until the twentieth century to finally bear fruit, but they were busily taking root during the nineteenth century. The end of slavery and the integration of blacks into white society, marked by terror, violence, racism, fear, oppression and violation of human and legal rights, is still, more than 150 years later, in progress. The role and influence of women was transformed by a myriad of factors, including education, industrialization and the massive shift from agrarian to urban, moving them from the private, domestic sphere to the public sphere and opening more potential for social and economic power. The nineteenth century also saw the most monumental rise in literacy rates in history. There is no data on literacy rates in the United States prior to 1860, but in 1820 France's literacy rate was 38% and the United Kingdom's was 53%; in 1870 the United States had a literacy rate of 80%, France 69% and the United Kingdom 76%. By 1910 the U.S. literacy rate reached 92% with France and the United Kingdom not far behind.³ In the United States, not just men, but women and blacks were becoming literate, which meant that not only were they reading but they were writing—and getting published. Women, especially, became a lucrative market for reading material. Women had more leisure time than ever and reading was respectable and ladylike. Writing, especially for publication, *especially for money* was potentially scandalous still, but the bold female pioneers of fiction paved the way for their successors.

The nineteenth century economy of the United States was tumultuous and unstable. There was the Panic of 1837, the Panic of 1857, the Panic of 1873, the Panic of 1893, bank failures,

³ Roser, Max, and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina. *Literacy*. September 2018, <https://ourworldindata.org/literacy>. (Accessed April 2019).

rank corruption, robber barons, and the financial devastation of the South following the Civil War. In short, nineteenth century America was ripe for an existential crisis. But somehow in the midst of all the crises and chaos creative expression flourished.

Americans had their own reasons for the rise of the new literary forms of realism, naturalism, and regionalism aside from the fashionable influences of French and British literature. The French Revolution certainly soured romanticism for the French,⁴ but Americans were also disenchanted with romanticism, and the embrace of a new expressive style that represented more authentically the reality of existence was a breath of fresh air to American writers. The brutality of the Civil War woke Americans up from any vestiges of romanticism they still clung to. It was as though Sherman's March asphyxiated the sigh of a happy ending from American fiction (for a while, at least). Americans were jolted awake to the scorched earth of reality where there are no happy endings. The best one could hope for in this bleak new landscape is mediocrity, like the unnamed, anonymous telegraphist of Henry James' *In the Cage* faces at the conclusion of the story.

Mathew Brady, the legendary photographer, faces the conclusion of his life in a rather sad, mediocre manner. Widowed, broke, and broken, Brady's end days were like a sad realist ending to the story of his illustrious life and legacy. When we think of Civil War photography, we think of Mathew Brady—whether or not we realize it. Those more familiar with Civil War photography we may think of Alexander Gardner, Timothy O'Sullivan, and James Gibson but they started out working for Brady and might not be as well-known to us today had it not been for the legendary reputation Brady tirelessly worked to cultivate for himself. In short, Mathew Brady embodies American Civil War photography. Particulars of which individuals actually took

⁴ Brooks. *Realist Vision*. 7.

which photographs and the many battles for property and copyright rights aside, for my purposes here, Mathew Brady represents American photography up to and through the Civil War.

Likewise, for the purpose of this paper, Jacob Riis represents American photojournalist/documentary/urban photography for the latter part of the nineteenth century, roughly coinciding with the era known as the Gilded Age (1870-1900), even though Riis did not begin his iconic work until the 1880s.

Photography was immediately recognized as useful in three main categories: science, where specimens could be recorded in breathtaking detail; landscapes, where scenes from across the globe could be captured; and portraits, where one's likeness could be preserved. Science and photography formed a natural and easy alliance, as it was through scientific curiosity that the methods for creating "sun pictures" was developed. Early photographic methods involved the delicate handling of highly toxic chemicals like mercury and potassium cyanide lending itself to being a process chemists and other scientists were initially most comfortable with. Artists, naturally, were also drawn to this new and rapidly-evolving image-making process.

Photography was unparalleled in capturing and recording details of specimens, and once the process for making paper prints from a negative was developed (wet plate process, c.1851), reproductions could be made and shared. The need for abundant natural sunlight and long exposure times made landscapes and architecture ideal subject matter for early photographers. Exotic locations could be photographed and transported across the globe so viewers could partake in such wonders as the Great Pyramids of Giza; not an artist's rendering, but as they "really" are. Reproduction of images via negatives of wet-plate photography meant that thousands of people across the world could enjoy the same view of pyramids—at the same time.

Naturally, people were a favorite subject for photographers. However, early photography required very long exposure times: “early daguerreotype images required an exposure of around twenty minutes, by the early 1840s it had been reduced to about twenty seconds.”⁵ Even twenty seconds is a long time to hold perfectly still, resulting in the stiff, grim-faced portraits associated with daguerreotypes. Interestingly, “Americans had embraced portrait photography more readily than European photographers, who generally focused more on places than people in their early efforts.”⁶ Mathew Brady became, through a combination of good timing (he got in the game early) charm, and talent the biggest name in American photographic portraiture. His work won awards at the 1851 World’s Fair in London, providing to the world “evidence that Americans had taken portraiture further.”⁷

Photographic portraits quickly became wildly popular. By 1855 “nearly every village of note” had a photography studio of some kind and “the 1860 U.S. Census counted 3,154 photographers in the nation.”⁸ For the first time in history, portraiture was available to nearly everyone. Portraiture had been a privilege exclusive to the wealthy classes; the nobles, the aristocracy. Brady biographer David Wilson puts it: “Suddenly a kind of immortality previously only available to the rich, who could afford to have their portraits painted...was now within the reach of almost everyone.”⁹ The affordability of photographic portraiture did not diminish the interest and enthusiasm the notable and wealthy took in sitting for cameras. This kind of social levelling was remarkable, and what I find even more striking is the lack of distinction, the sameness, that photographs of the very wealthy share with photographic portraits of the average

⁵ *In Focus: The Evolution of the Personal Camera*. n.d. <https://dp.la/exhibitions/evolution-personal-camera/early-photography>. (Accessed April 2019).

⁶ Robert Wilson. *Mathew Brady: Portraits of a Nation*. (First. New York, New York: Bloomsbury USA. 2013). 40.

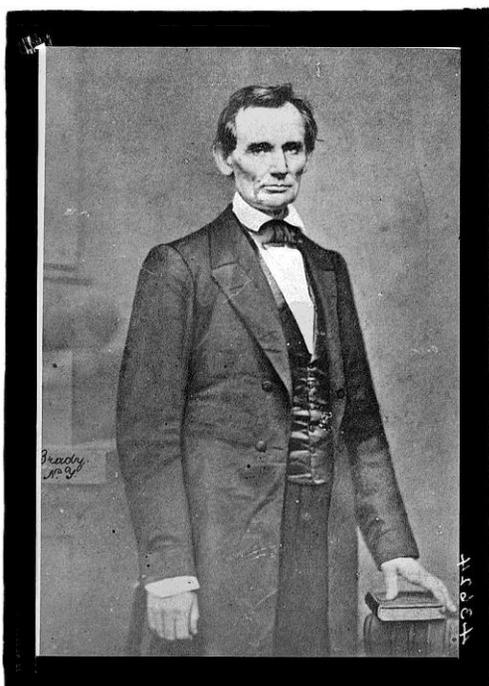
⁷ Wilson. *Mathew Brady: Portraits of a Nation*. 40.

⁸ *Ibid.* 35-36.

⁹ *Ibid.* 34.

person. Families, or individuals would go to a portrait studio—Brady’s studio if they could afford it—wearing their best clothes, and sit in the same chairs, in front of the same backdrops as the wealthiest customers, resulting in images that were more similar than different. Abraham Lincoln, especially wearing a rumpled suit, looks no more distinguished than David Herold, an accomplice of John Wilkes Booth in Lincoln’s assassination, excepting the fact that the copy of the Lincoln portrait is clearly in better shape. Both are Brady studio portraits.^{10,11}

Photo of Lincoln (Cooper Union Photo, 1860)
Source: Library of Congress



David Herold (circa 1861-65)
Source: Library of Congress



Almost everyone, rich and poor, noble and common wanted a photographic portrait made. For, “[e]ven if you could afford a painted portrait, the result would be another person’s

¹⁰ *Photo of Lincoln (Cooper Union photo, 1860)*. 1860. Mathew Brady. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016823206/>.

¹¹ *Civil War Glass Negatives and Related Prints*. c. 1861-65. Mathew Brady. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/ppmsca.35255/?co=cwp>.

impression or interpretation of what you looked like. This new medium...portrayed you as you really were.”¹² As we know, photography did not kill painting or even portraiture, but painting, like literature, was transformed by photography. Photography became a tool for portraitists and could markedly decrease the subject’s sitting time. Also, expert retouching was an especially popular way to enhance photographic portraits and seemingly elevate them to works of art. In reaction to Brady’s oil-enhanced, giant-sized portraits he dubbed “Imperials,” *Harper’s Weekly* declared in an October 1857 issue: “The vocation of the portrait painter is not gone, but modified. Portrait painting by the old methods is as completely defunct as navigation by the stars.”¹³ As a result, painters switched gears, turning their attention to subject matter and forms of expression a camera could not capture—yet.

Peter Brooks poses the question: “Is this to say that photography creates realism, by offering the first true reproduction of the real?” He responds by turning the question on its head, stating that “realism, as an aesthetic, a project, a stance towards the world, invents photography. At least the invention of photography almost seems inevitable in the context of realism; and when it is invented, it appears at once as the ally and tool of realism.”¹⁴ To support this claim he notes the centuries-long use of the camera obscura, precursor to the camera, before the “nineteenth century saw an accelerating search for a substance that would fix the image.”¹⁵ It is a fair point, but history is full of periods of rapid transitions and identifying true causality in a confluence of events, especially when it comes to invention, is tricky. I believe the main thrust of his argument is that cultural shifts lit a fire of urgency, causing that serendipitous creation of the same invention by two people, separately, at the same time, as coincidentally happened with

¹² Wilson. *Mathew Brady: Portraits of a Nation*. 34.

¹³ *Ibid.* 48.

¹⁴ Brooks. *Realist Vision*. 86.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

photography as well as electricity, motion pictures, and other inventions. Nevertheless, I fundamentally disagree with Brooks: I think the chemical processes to fix the images came about as a result of scientific advancements, particularly our understanding of the properties of the elements, which occurred in the eighteenth century. I think a large number of factors influenced the move away from romanticism in literature and art, but the horrors of the French Revolution—so bloody and brutal compared to the American Revolution—and the American Civil War, account for the momentum driving the thirst for authenticity.

Refuting Brooks' argument, I believe that photography "creates realism, by offering the first true reproduction of the real." Photography was not the single factor, but rather an ingredient in the cocktail composed of scientific discovery, war, economic instability, and other factors that disenchanted us with the escapism of romanticism. Instead of asking what created what, if we rephrase Brooks' question as: did photography *influence* realism by offering the first true reproduction of the real? I think unequivocally, yes, but what does "first true reproduction of the real" mean exactly? An in-depth philosophical dive into the nature of reality is beyond the scope of this paper, but, as Kant argued, we cannot really see true reality, so all we know of reality is appearances, like Plato's idea that we live in a shadow or illusion of true reality and that "art is an imitation of an imitation."¹⁶ Photography is an imitation of reality.

Photographs were the closest anyone had ever come to capturing and recording an image of all the infinitesimal detail of a real thing, but the question of what is real gets as fuzzy around the edges as the question of what is truth. Leslie Mullen explores this question in her paper "Truth in Photography: Perception, Myth and Reality in The Postmodern World." She observes: "Although the photograph involves a reduction in proportion, perspective and color, we still

¹⁶ Brooks. *Realist Vision*. 7.

understand that the photograph is a representation of reality.”¹⁷ She cites Roland Barthes, noting that “the reduction from object to image does not cause us to perceive a photograph as a lesser form of reality.”¹⁸ As Barthes says, “It is not at all necessary to break down this (photographic) reality into units and to constitute these units into signs substantially different from the object they represent ...the image is not the reality, but at least it is its perfect *analogon*, and it is just this analogical perfection which... defines the photograph.”¹⁹

A painter can paint a unicorn so convincingly we feel it is believable. A writer can describe a unicorn with enough detail we can also feel that it is believable. A photographer can attach a horn to a horse and give the appearance of the reality of a unicorn, but without the horse and without the horn, there is no unicorn. In other words, a painter and a writer can invent, describe and represent what is not even there, but a photographer must work with things that exist in reality in order to create their likeness in a photograph. A manipulation of the truth can be presented, but there is an undeniable element of realism that a photograph must have: the horse is real, the horn is real, the appearance of the horn being part of the horse is an illusion. This grounding in reality is what Roland Barthes calls the "that-has-been-there" of the photograph.²⁰

While painting and fiction can represent objects that do not exist, photography is more limited in representing the wholly unreal. Early on, photographers figured out how to manipulate images and create illusions of reality. For example, the pictorialism movement, exemplified by the work of Oscar Gustave Rejlander, created composite scenes consisting of dozens of single

¹⁷ Leslie Mullen. "Truth in Photography: Perception, Myth and Reality in the Postmodern World." (Florida: University of Florida, 1998). 17.

¹⁸Mullen. "Truth in Photography: Perception, Myth and Reality in the Postmodern World." 17.

¹⁹ Roland Barthes. "The Photographic Message," *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation*. Trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1985) 5.

²⁰ Daniel A. Novak. "Photographic Fictions: Nineteenth-Century Photography and the Novel Form." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* (Duke University Press) Vol. 43, No. v, 25.

photographs, creating the illusion of multiple people sharing the same space at the same time when in fact they were not, akin to actors appearing together in a film, as part of a cohesive story, without ever actually having met. Nowadays, we are savvy to camera tricks, but the power of the absolute truth of photographs in the early days was enormous. For example, the Cottingley Fairy hoax of 1917 even convinced Sir Arthur Conan Doyle that he was seeing photographs of real fairies.²¹ Although pictorialism and photographic hoaxes are not the focus here, the potential for illusion and trickery in photography must be considered in the context of Mathew Brady, Jacob Riis and literary realism.

Retouching is a form of manipulation of the truth of a photograph, but does it affect the reality of the what is represented in the image? The posing of subjects could also be considered manipulation, but “taking” as they called it, required human subjects to stand still, or pose, in order to capture a focused image. Like painters, photographers composed their images, but does that diminish their authenticity? Even, as Mullen notes, documentary photographers compose shots by choosing vantage points to shoot from; a far cry from manufacturing or manipulating and presenting as true something that is artifice.²² Intentionality in choosing vantage point is perspective, and perspective is a crucial element of literary realism.

The perspective of the unnamed telegraphist of Henry James’ *In the Cage* is almost a character unto itself, similar to the way in which the town of North Dormer is a character in Edith Wharton’s *Summer*. The concept of setting as character is not unusual in fiction, but perspective as character is more unexpected. The young telegraphist, the narrator, looks out into the world and even views others as though she were actually existing from within her “framed

²¹ Rosa Lyster. *History Lessons: The Cottingley fairy hoax of 1917 is a case study in how smart people lose control of the truth.* February 17, 2017. <https://qz.com/911990/the-cottingley-fairy-hoax-of-1917-is-a-case-study-in-how-smart-people-lose-control-of-the-truth/>.

²²Mullen. "Truth in Photography: Perception, Myth and Reality in the Postmodern World." 17.

and wired confinement.”²³ She keeps herself remote, as though the wire barrier of her cage is part of her, which keeps her from fully engaging in the reality of her own life. She is so immersed in the alternate reality she has composed from the fleeting encounters, the images, she has with the wealthy telegraph patrons that rather than participating in her own life, she prefers gazing into the lives of others, caught up in the details she has invented for them. She refers to them as “her ladies” and “her gentlemen” and “she read into the immensity of their intercourse stories and meanings without end.”²⁴ Essentially they are strangers—whose names she knows, but who will never know her name, and thus she remains nameless—who are barely more than images that flit by her view from her telegraph’s cage. She is at once observed, yet observer. In the cage, “of a guinea-pig or a magpie”²⁵ she is on display, but she also is the viewer, like a cameraman hiding under the cloth, she can pretend to be an objective observer while, in her own mind, inserting herself into the image, like a Mathew Brady photograph. She pretends to want only the role of Brady, the observer, seen, yet unobtrusive, but what she really wants is to get out of her cage, from behind her camera through which she observes the world, and join Captain Everard in the picture where the real people exist. She stalks Everard outside his residence, hoping, yet dreading to meet him. When she finally does, she is an awkward jumble of overly remote and inappropriately intimate; clearly, she needs to get back in her cage to normalize the situation, as much as she longs to be free from it. In the end she must give up her fantasy and face the banality of her real life and her destiny as Mrs. Mudge.

Perspective is also a major character in Sarah Orne Jewett’s novel, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. She is an outsider looking in, but her story feels like a journey through a photo

²³ Henry James. *In The Cage*. (Kindle Edition. Transcribed from 1919 Martin Secker edition by David Price). 3.

²⁴ James. *In The Cage*. 10.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

album. The narrator, a visitor to the rural Maine countryside, gives the reader something more akin to a series of photographic sketches than a story. With no plot and only a thread of narrative structure, the reader instead is greeted with scene after scene, very painterly in affect, which combine to create a ‘story’ analogous to what one would get looking through someone’s vacation photo album while listening to the commentary by the vacationer: “Here’s the house where I stayed .. here’s the proprietor of the house, she was nice, but nosy...here’s the old schoolhouse I would sit in to work on my novel...here’s the old man who showed up and wouldn’t stop talking. Actually, he turned out to be very interesting...” Like the narrator of *In the Cage*, the narrator of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* remains unnamed, but completely unlike the young telegraphist, this story is told through the eyes of an independent woman who is clearly educated, mature, and wealthy enough to be seeking rural solace in order to write her novel. She takes an interest in the country folk she is enjoying the hospitality of with the detachment of an anthropologist—or a photographer. The images Jewett creates through this story is evocative of photojournalism.

Jacob Riis is a pioneer of photojournalism. Unlike Mathew Brady, Riis was a writer. In fact, he did not even consider himself to be much of a photographer and only learned the craft in order to document the horrors he was encountering on his rounds as police reporter, which he felt that his words could not do justice to describe.²⁶ Brady thought of himself as more of an artist, and hoped for recognition as such.²⁷ Nevertheless, his decision to expand his operation out into the field to document the Civil War makes him what we could call a proto-pioneer of

²⁶ Jacob A. Riis. *How The Other Half Lives*. (New York, New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1971) Preface vii.

²⁷ Wilson. *Mathew Brady: Portraits of a Nation*. 163.

photojournalism (British photographer Roger Fenton, who photographed the Crimean War in 1855, was the first “war photographer”).²⁸

We really do not know what Brady’s intentions were in documenting the war, but we know that he valued the historical significance of photography, and he also believed it would be a profitable commercial endeavor, expecting that the government would buy his collection for its historical value. He claimed to have invested \$100,000 in the venture, losing it all.²⁹ While Brady did have advocates who recognized the historical value of his work, he was unable to sell his collection to cover the debt he had incurred, as America had lost its appetite for images of war, and the federal government was more interested in rebuilding the nation than remembering the past.³⁰ Eventually most of what survived of the collection came to be property of the Library of Congress, but this was long after Brady’s death.

Mathew Brady was an aspiring artist with an acumen for business savvy when he learned the daguerreotype technique from Samuel F. B. Morse, the first American to learn it in France, when the process was first made public in 1839.³¹ Brady became the most well-known portrait photographer of his time. Brady saw himself as “a sort of historian” in documenting portraits of noteworthy men and women of his day,³² and worked to “form a gallery which shall eventually contain life-portraits of every distinguished American now living”³³ Robert Wilson credits Brady with helping create the idea of celebrity: “Brady was not only enamored of the rich and famous, but in his own increasing role in creating a culture of celebrity saw them as a means to an end.”³⁴

²⁸ Daniel, Malcolm. “Roger Fenton (1819–1869).” In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/rfen/hd_rfen.htm (October 2004).

²⁹ Wilson. *Mathew Brady: Portraits of a Nation*. 94.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 199.

³¹ *Ibid.* 7-18.

³² *Ibid.* 24.

³³ *Ibid.* 25.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 154.

Brady photographed Abraham Lincoln on many occasions, both Union and Confederate leaders, all the U.S. presidents of his adult life, and many other notable people including Henry James and his father, Nathaniel Hawthorne, James Fennimore Cooper, and Edgar Allan Poe.

Wet plate photography made it easy and cheap to produce multiple small albumen prints of the same image, similar to what we call wallet-sized. These small photos, the *carte de visite* (visiting card) became so popular that “Oliver Wendell Holmes, in one of his influential articles about photography, observed in the July 1863 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* that what he called ‘card-portraits’ had become ‘the social currency, the sentimental “green-backs” of civilization, within a very recent period.’”³⁵ As their popularity grew and a place to keep them became a necessity, the photo album was developed, complete with pockets to organize and display collections, which consisted of images of family and friends, but also statesmen, writers, singers and actors. Brady’s studios produced everything from “Brady Imperials” which ranged from twenty-two by thirty inches to twenty by twenty-four³⁶ to the popular *carte de visites*, the demand for which skyrocketed as boys and men were sent off to war.

The accusation that Brady and/or his cohorts moved corpses around and rearranged them to dramatize their suffering has grown to such mythic proportion that it is considered common knowledge. It has inspired poetry and is even the subject of a lesson plan for a children’s art project where students debate the honesty and artistic integrity of such actions. This grossly mistaken and misunderstood impression—which is often used to undermine Brady’s reputation—apparently stems from a close analysis of a series of photographs Alexander Gardner took. In *Gardner’s Photographic Sketch Book of the War*, published in 1865-66, there is a series of six photographs: four of “Sharpshooter’s Last Sleep” show a corpse on the southern slope of

³⁵ Wilson. *Mathew Brady: Portraits of a Nation*. 71.

³⁶ Wilson. *Mathew Brady: Portraits of a Nation*. 47.

Devil's Den, and two of "Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter" showing a corpse in a rocky niche. It was historian William Frassanito who discovered that the two corpses in these photos are the same slain soldier, posed in two different locations, with two different biographical sketches, written by Gardner. In his book *Gettysburg: A Journey in Time* Frassanito surmises that Gardner first encountered the body in the southern slope location, photographed it, then noticed the rocky niche, which appeared to have been the "sharpshooter's den" and dragged the corpse—probably with the aid of a blanket that appears in the niche photos—to photograph the corpse in the area where he was likely holed up until he was killed.³⁷ Frassanito further surmises that the "sharpshooter" was probably just an infantryman killed as he was climbing the slope because the gun in the photos is not even the type of weapon used by sharpshooters, and he suggests it is actually a photographer's prop.³⁸ The plates are accompanied by a dramatic narrative description, written by Gardner, and the impression is given that these are two separate individuals, so yes, there is a deception—or artistic license taken. However, there is nothing to link the deception to Brady in any way except that Gardner and O'Sullivan, who was also photographing Gettysburg and may have assisted Gardner, worked for Brady at the time. There is also no evidence that this was not an isolated incident. The public imagination has run wild and accused Brady of posing and rearranging corpses all over Civil War battlefields without the slightest evidence that there was another corpse-moving incident, and regardless of the fact that Brady himself was minding his studio business for most of the war and was rarely out in the field.

It took a while to learn how to photograph outside of the studio: "Even in the field the portraits were created according to studio conventions, using poses they had learned from studio

³⁷ William Frassanito. *Gettysburg: A Journey in Time* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975). 186-192.

³⁸ Frassanito. *Gettysburg: A Journey in Time*. 186-192.

portraiture.”³⁹ During the rare couple of occasions when Brady himself visited battlefields he created some of the most artistic and memorable images of the Civil War. His photographs of Gettysburg have drawn especially high praise. Of this stereograph of three Confederate prisoners



Three "Johnnie Reb" Prisoners, captured at Gettysburg, 1863
*Source: Library of Congress*⁴⁰

on Seminary Ridge, Wilson says: “Nothing that Gardner or his men did with their more dramatic subject matter can compete with this Brady photograph as a work of art.”⁴¹ Brady’s photographs of Gettysburg demonstrate a trained eye for detail, composition and perspective. By, at times, placing himself in the photograph, not as focal point and not as the subject, but off to the side, or as a distant observer of the same scene presented to the viewer, Brady brings a reflexive consciousness to the image; as if to say “What you are seeing is real because I am seeing it also.” As Wilson puts it: “Brady introduced what might be called first-person photography, an assertion

³⁹ Wilson. *Mathew Brady: Portraits of a Nation*. 93.

⁴⁰ Brady, Mathew. 1863. *Three "Johnnie Reb" Prisoners, captured at Gettysburg, 1863*. Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2004682780/>.

⁴¹ Wilson. *Mathew Brady: Portraits of a Nation*. 164.

that a photograph is not just the doings of a sunbeam, an objective rendering of a scene, but a view created, in effect, by an individual consciousness.”⁴² Brady’s Gettysburg photographs display no dead bodies and only one dead horse “but in their psychological pointedness his photographs are more intense than any of the gruesome pictures Gardner and his men took.”⁴³

The move from the stiff, staged portraits of the beginning of the war to the more relaxed, natural compositions created at the end of the war both reflects and influences the move toward realism. The photographic scenes of war that were captured of the American Civil War were the first of their kind. Photos of the dead were nothing new; post-mortem, or memorial photography was a popular way to immortalize the recently deceased, but photographs of fallen soldiers in battlefields were another matter. After viewing the stereoscope images of Antietam in Brady’s studio, Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in the *Times*: “Let him who wishes to know what war is look at his series of illustrations. These wrecks of manhood thrown together in careless heaps or ranged in ghastly rows for burial were alive but yesterday.”⁴⁴ This was hardly the “living room war” of the Vietnam era, where daily newsfeeds were witnessed on American television; the only way to see an actual Brady photograph was to visit either his New York or Washington D.C. studios. Prints published in newspapers and periodicals such as *Harper’s* or the *Times* were engraved etchings made from the photos because techniques for reprinting for the press were not yet invented, which no matter how technically skilled the artisan, lacked the visceral real-ness of a photograph. After seeing the display of Antietam photographs at Brady’s New York studio, and unnamed reporter for the *Times* was surprised that the grisly images did not make him want to look away, “But, on the contrary, there is a terrible fascination about it that draws one near these

⁴² Wilson. *Mathew Brady: Portraits of a Nation*. 162.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 163.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 138-39.

pictures, and makes him loth to leave them.”⁴⁵ He also praised Brady for having “done something to bring home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war. If he has not brought bodies and laid them in our dooryards and along the streets, he has done something very like it.”⁴⁶ Alexander Gardner, not Brady, was responsible for most of the images of the dead.⁴⁷

Writers also began to present us with images we might not want to see—and yet, we cannot look away. Rebecca Harding Davis seemingly sets the stage for American realism with the highly visual, bleak, unhappy and unjust view of the world in her 1861 *Life in the Iron-Mills*, where hard work and talent are unrewarded even when recognized. This story is a precursor to realism in its highly visual style, naturalistic in the fatality of class distinctions and romantic in the salvation of the ending. Mark Twain excelled at showing readers the painful, ugly side of humanity, but his wicked humor and use of tropes allows readers a sense of emotional distance while keeping us hooked through his engaging plots. The plot of *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) is rooted in appearances: blackness appearing as whiteness (and vice versa), clothing altering identity, and fingerprints, preserved like tiny photographic negatives, holding the true secret to identity.

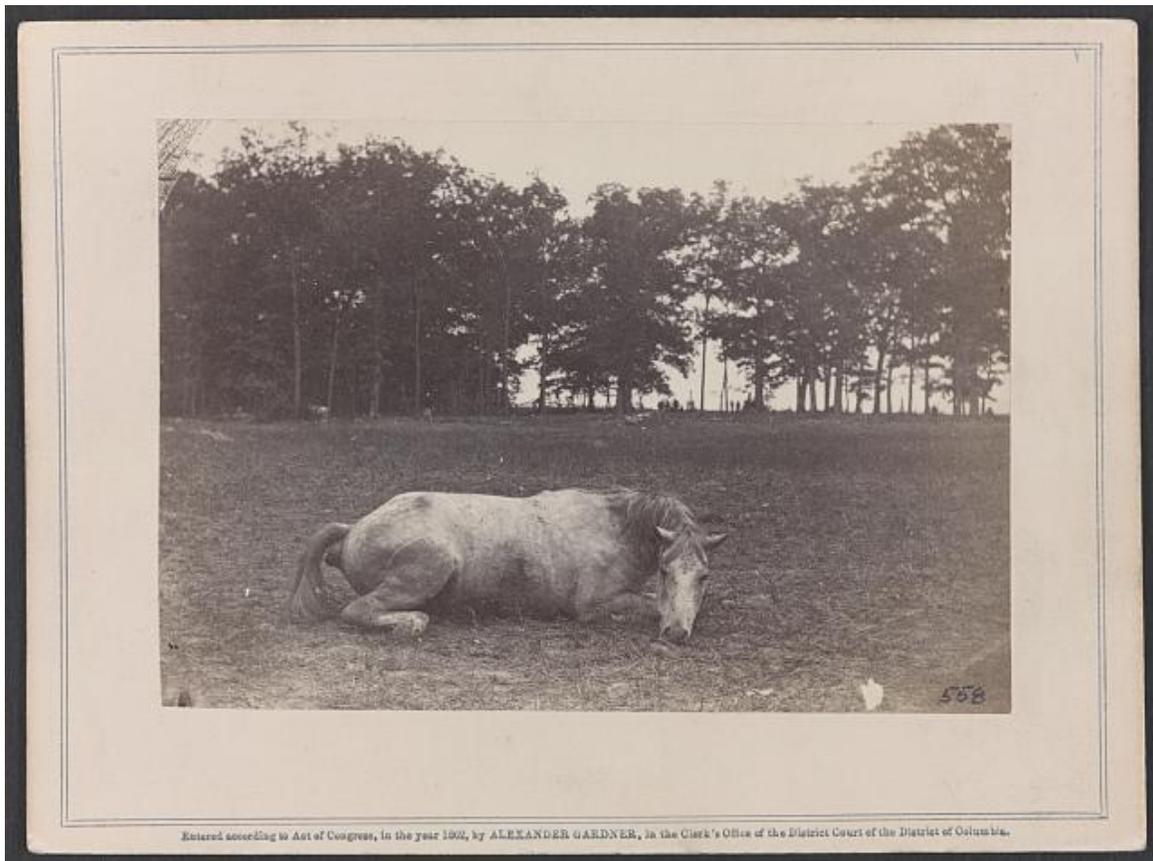
Edith Wharton's *Summer* is also replete with images we do not want to see yet cannot look away from. The pain of Charity's heartache and the humiliation of her pregnancy are easy to bear compared to the disgust we feel at her being forced to marry her foster father in order to lend an illusion of legitimacy to the child she is bearing. We wish Charity Royall's story could have had the happy ending of a romantic novel, but she lives in full view of the naked windows where reality strips us bare of such illusions. Like James' telegraphist from *In the Cage*, Charity

⁴⁵ Wilson. *Mathew Brady: Portraits of a Nation*. 137-38.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 139.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 134.

observes and is observed, and in the end she has only the cloak of banality for shelter. Charity is like the image of the dead horse taken by Alexander Gardner; at the end of the story, she merely retains the appearance of being alive. Like a horse, Charity's willfulness was broken and her passion bridled by the constraints of her social class and physical condition.



Confederate colonel and horse, both killed at the Battle of Antietam
 Source: *Library of Congress*⁴⁸

Photography, quite literally, allows us to see the world more clearly. Details can be recorded and then studied and analyzed at leisure. As Mullen puts it: "A photograph allows us to study a scene for more detail than we would be able to see by looking at the scene firsthand."⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Alexander Gardner. c. 1862. *Confederate colonel and horse, both killed at the Battle of Antietam*. Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2012650218/>.

⁴⁹ Mullen. "Truth in Photography: Perception, Myth and Reality in the Postmodern World." 17.

Photography allows time to stand still, preserving moments that can be studied, which is exactly how William Frassanito discovered that Alexander Gardner must have moved a corpse and photographed it as though it were a casualty separate from the casualty in the original position. The intricate detail of photographs that lends itself to their careful scrutiny and their potential for hidden mysteries is the set-up for the 1966 Michelangelo Antonioni film *Blow Up* about a photographer who discovers what he believes is a murder lurking in the background of one of his photos.

Detailism is a hallmark of literary realism and sometimes the term is intended as a derogatory slight. In 1865 English philosopher and literary critic, George Henry Lewes, wrote in *The Principles of Success in Literature* “Of late years there has been a reaction against conventionalism which called itself Idealism, in favour of DETAILISM which calls itself Realism.”⁵⁰ He complains of the “obtrusiveness of Detail and a preference for the Familiar, under the misleading notion of adherence to Nature.”⁵¹ He goes on to say: “If the words Nature and Natural could be entirely banished from language about Art there would be some chance of coming to a rational philosophy of the subject,”⁵² pointing out that plenty of the fiction in art is natural (“the cows and misty marshes of Cuyp and the vacillations of Hamlet are equally natural”).⁵³ Interestingly, it was his partner George Eliot who wrote in an 1856 review of art critic John Ruskin's *Modern Painters* that true realism consists of a careful selection and recombining of detail: "all the truths of nature cannot be given . . . The inferior artist chooses unimportant and scattered truths: the great artist chooses the most necessary first, and afterwards

⁵⁰ George Henry Lewes. *The Principles of Success in Literature*. (Edited by Prepared by Roland Cheney. Project Gutenberg License December 9, 2003). Kindle Locations 765-766.

⁵¹ Lewes. *The Principles of Success in Literature*. 765-766.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid. 769.

the most consistent with these, so as to obtain the greatest possible and most harmonious scene”⁵⁴ As Daniel Novak explains: “Victorian critics linked photography and the realist novel through a shared dilemma: a preponderance of details without a governing structure.”⁵⁵ To some extent, the details *are* the story. In a story like *The Country of the Pointed Firs* there is no plot;



Jacob A. Riis “In the Home of an Italian Rag-picker, Jersey Street”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Daniel A. Novak. "Photographic Fictions: Nineteenth-Century Photography and the Novel Form." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* (Duke University Press, 2010) Vol. 43, No. 1, Theories of the Novel Now, Part III: 23-30. Accessed 2019. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27764365>.

⁵⁵ Novak. "Photographic Fictions: Nineteenth-Century Photography and the Novel Form."

⁵⁶ Jacob A. Riis. "In the Home of an Italian Rag-picker, Jersey Street." 1897. International Center for Photography. (Accessed April 2019). <https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/objects/in-the-home-of-an-italian-rag-picker-jersey-street>.

there is only a series of scenes that together form an impression. Henry James supposedly set out to write like a painter, like an impressionist, and impressionism, as the study of light, could be said to have been created by photography.

Jacob Riis did not consider himself an artist, but clearly, he understood the power of presenting truths in a harmonious manner, creating artistic images that, ironically reveal the truth of the inharmony of reality. Part of the power and beauty of the photo of the Italian rag-picker holding an infant lies in the details of the figure's context, and it is the apparent lack of any kind of constructing of detail that attests to its authenticity. The woman is surrounded by piles of things, but there are no "unimportant and scattered truths."

Victorian critics found many flaws with photography, I suspect not least because this new medium was seen as a threat to established ideas of what is considered art. Victorians criticized the stiffness of early daguerreotypes, not just of individual postures but the relationship between people. As one critic put it, "when two or more persons are taken in one picture, it is no uncommon thing to see them standing without any connexion whatever with each other, as isolated and independent as the statuettes on the board of an Italian image-man"⁵⁷ We see this sense of disconnect, the isolation of the individual in James' *In The Cage*. This odd stiffness between people is part of realism. The photograph shows us what the realist novel creates through pictures made of words: we are strangers to each other, living in the same house or the same town, we are alone, isolated, and disconnected.

George Eliot was especially critical of Charles Dickens' large casts of characters who lacked real essence of personality, like people in a photograph. She writes that Dickens "scarcely ever passes from the humorous and external to the emotional and tragic, without becoming as

⁵⁷ Novak. "Photographic Fictions: Nineteenth-Century Photography and the Novel Form."

transcendent in his unreality as he was a moment before in his artistic truthfulness"⁵⁸ The same could be said of Twain's characters in *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* and even possibly to some extent, though not humorous, to the characters in Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*. On the one hand it would seem contradictory that realism and naturalism would employ stock characters to tell stories, but tropes allow the writer to cut to the chase, so to speak, and tell the story, which is where reality is being reflected. In naturalist novels such as these the characters are just doing the inevitable—fulfilling their determined destinies; locked in step with their own fates, so does it matter that they are not more fleshed out than a figure in a photograph? Like a photograph the emphasis is on scene, not plot or character. Novak says that Eliot “suggests that this failure defines the photographic aesthetic as such, and even locates this failure at the level of structure and grammar. Only a collection of ‘gestures and phrases,’ the photograph is grammatically challenged. Photographic writing produces only ill-fitting and agrammatical details or collections of ‘phrases’ that fragment internally and threaten to disrupt the grammatical coherence of the textual ‘composition.’”⁵⁹ Ultimately, Eliot is saying is that “what photography and literary realism share is their failure to produce coherent form” because “realist detail disrupts the ‘grammar’ of pictorial and novelistic structure.”⁶⁰ Eliot was a proponent of the idea that realism should be written from genuine experience and show us morality without preaching it. In his article about realism British scholar John Mullan says that it was “George Eliot, however, who took omniscient third-person narration to an unprecedented level of sophistication. Her technique makes it seem as if she is approaching her characters rather than inventing them;

⁵⁸ Novak. "Photographic Fictions: Nineteenth-Century Photography and the Novel Form."

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Novak. "Photographic Fictions: Nineteenth-Century Photography and the Novel Form."



Bandit's Roost by Jacob A. Riis source MoMA⁶¹

she will probe and puzzle over their motives rather than simply state them.”⁶² This sounds like Jacob Riis’ approach to photography.

⁶¹ Jacob A. Riis. *Bandits' Roost, 59 1/2 Mulberry Street*. 1888. MoMA, New York.
<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/50859>.

⁶² John Mullan. "Realism." *Discovering Literature: Romantics & Victorians*. (British Library. May 15. 2014).
<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/realism>.

In his work as a police reporter in lower Manhattan in the 1880s, Riis encountered scenes of such squalor and inhumane living conditions that it was difficult to believe they were real. He reported his experiences accompanying police as they raided overcrowded tenements and “stale beer dives” at all hours of the night, but he felt that words could not really do justice to the plight he was witnessing. He felt he needed a visual record, but he could not draw, nor did he know how to make photographs, which was still a very laborious process, so after teaming up with a photographer but finding the arrangement unsatisfying, he bought equipment and learned photography.⁶³ The realism and naturalism movements in American literature were already in full swing in 1890 when Riis’ seminal *How the Other Half Lives* was published. The effect of the book not only brought attention to the problem of the miserable slums of the overcrowded tenements, but the images expanded and emboldened the American appetite for exploring the depths of despair. Mathew Brady, et al. proved that Americans would not look away from grisly battlefield photos and Jacob Riis revealed that Americans would embrace images of the miserable living.

While *How the Other Half Lives* sold well and was well-received by critics, American readers were not ready to embrace the dark and sordid worlds of Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900) or Charles W. Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), neither of which was received well; both were riddled with bleak, stark portrayals of what was too close to real life, real people, and in the case of Chesnutt, real situations. Both of these works are considered naturalism, and both of them reflect the down and dirty, boots-on-the-pavement kind of glimpse into the dark recesses of humanity where Riis took his camera and literally exposed the depravity

⁶³ Riis. *How The Other Half Lives*. Preface vii.

of the human condition. Apparently reading about the animalistic lives of tenement dwellers and poring over etchings made from the photographs of the miserable souls in *How the Other Half Lives* was more appealing and tolerable than living the vicarious experience of the desperation in *Sister Carrie* or the brutal racism in *The Marrow of Tradition*.

Not surprisingly, it is in the modern and post-modern age when American writers of realism and naturalism are more appreciated than in their own time; nowadays we are so jaded from our overexposure to fictitious and real scenes of graphic violence we can stomach turn-of-the-century realism with a sense of perspective that contemporaries of the literature were perhaps not ready to embrace. Even so, we dislike unhappy endings (I think it is just human nature to hope for happy outcomes), so while realism and naturalism are more appreciated, they are still not chart-toppers. We love gazing into the lives of others and “[r]emoving housetops in order to see the private lives played out beneath them.”⁶⁴ We now live fully in the age of celebrity, as glamorized by Mathew Brady with his cultivation of notable clients and the collecting of their “likenesses.” The glamorous world Theodore Dreiser’s *Carrie* longed to inhabit is on display 24/7 at the press of a button. Mathew Brady has created Kim Kardashian. Our current obsession with presenting ourselves at our Photoshopped best is more testimony to romanticism which still holds its grip. As literary critic M.H. Abrams says: “the romance is said to present life as we would have it be, more picturesque, more adventurous, more heroic than the actual.”⁶⁵ The photograph has, today, far exceeded influencing genres of writing that dared to strip away conventionality, and even beauty, and come to sometimes actually replace writing—as Jacob Riis, in a way, dared to do.

⁶⁴ Brooks. *Realist Vision*. 3.

⁶⁵ M.H Abrams. “Definitions of Realism and Naturalism” from *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. (5th Edition. San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1988). 152-154.

The photograph has changed the world and the way we communicate. The photograph has changed literature. As Abrams said: "The typical realist sets out to write a fiction which will give the illusion that it reflects life and the social world as it seems to the common reader." With the press of a button the photographer can achieve the same end. That is a gross oversimplification, but the impact of photography shook the art world to its foundation, where it was forced to ask and answer the question: what is it to represent something? Photography compelled change, transformation and growth. Visual representation was achieved. Painting was driven to discover new avenues of exploration and experimentation and the literary arts freely played around, dancing circles round their artistic cousins, borrowing, imitating, inspiring and being inspired by, accepting and rejecting, never tiring of the infinite ways in which words can be arranged to capture or refute human experience of reality. The drive toward authenticity that world events inspired of writers was perhaps part of the same package of exploration and discovery that led to the fixing of the images viewed through the camera obscura, but forces at work in the eighteenth century, which laid the groundwork for nineteenth century inventions, were the mother of photography's invention. Photography, the result of scientific pursuit, showed the world a near mirror reflection of itself. What the world was to do with that was up to humankind.

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