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"Pray for the People Who Feed You": Voices of Pauper Children in the Industrial Age

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"Pray for the People Who Feed You": Voices of Pauper Children in the Industrial Age

Description

Following the Industrial Revolution in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, countries such as the United States and England experienced a widening gap between the rich industrialists and the impoverished working class. As a result, poverty quickly shifted from a localized problem to a national epidemic. Each country was faced with the challenges of addressing and alleviating poverty on a national scale. With a limited amount of resources, questions arose about who should receive relief. What should it look like? How should it be administered? And how would poverty and policy affect political, economic, social and familial structures? [*excerpt*]

Keywords

industrialization, child labor, immigrants, working class, child poverty

Disciplines

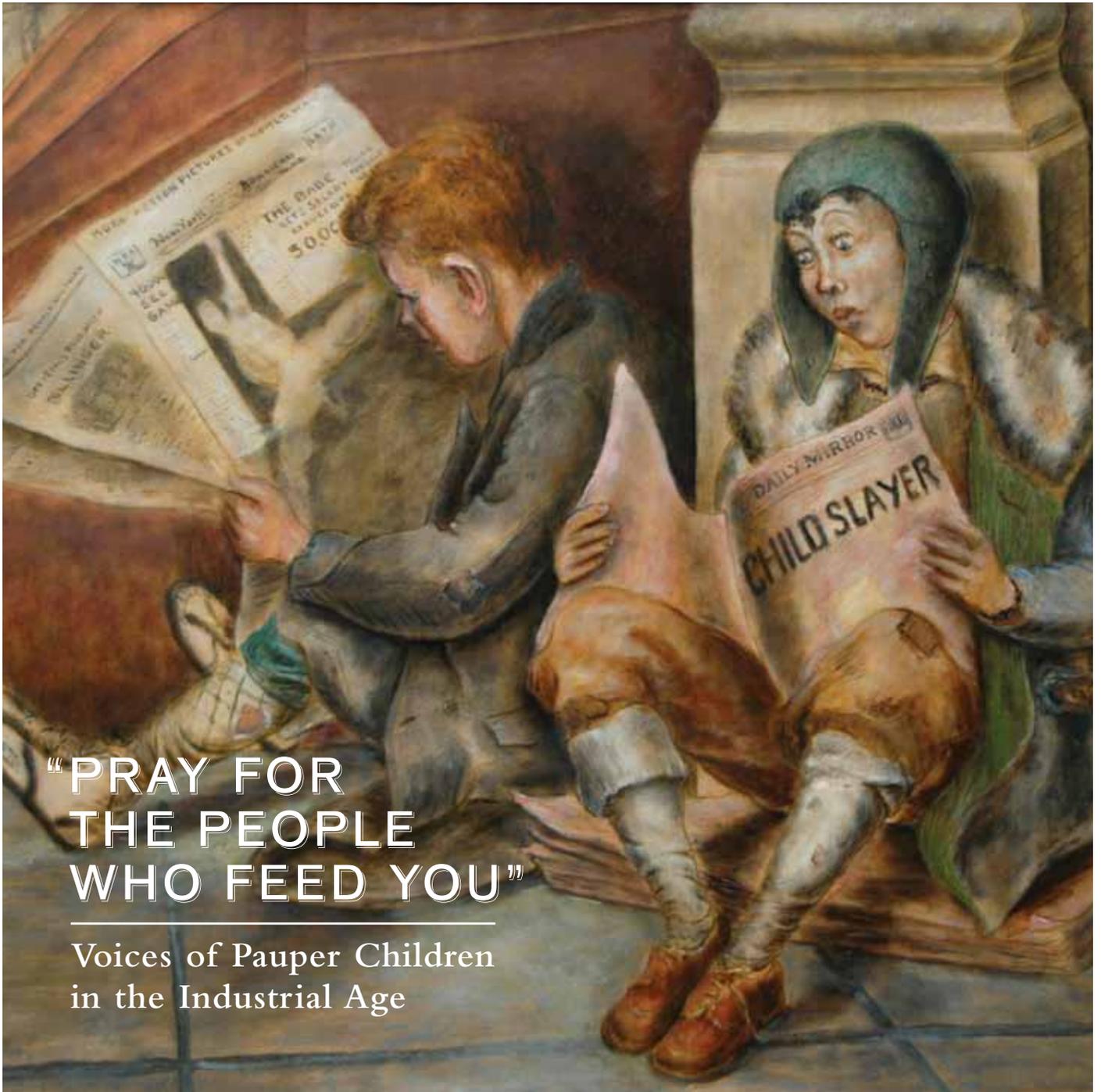
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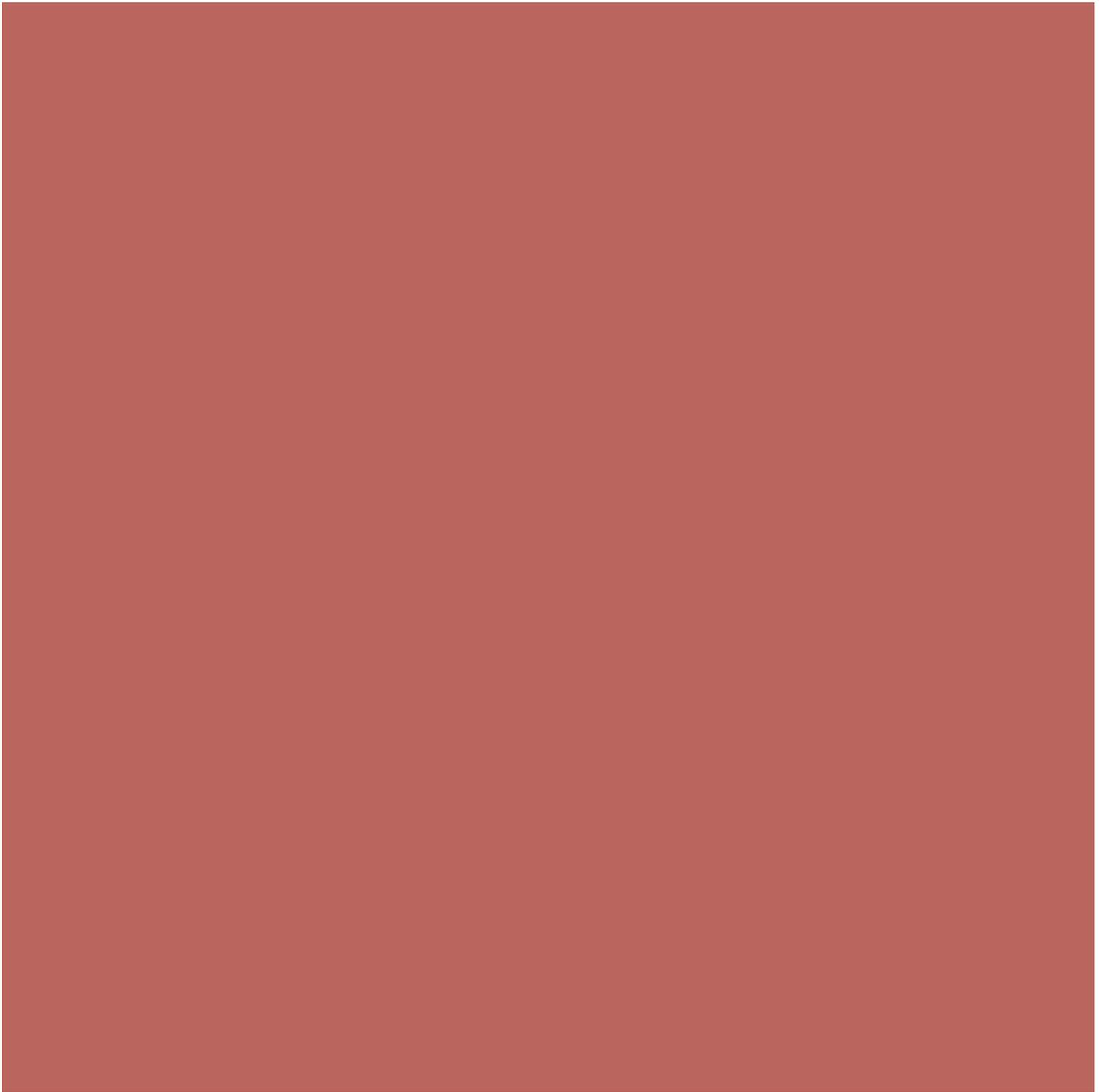
Comments

"Pray for the People Who Feed You": Voices of Pauper Children in the Industrial Age was on exhibition at the Schmucker Art Gallery at Gettysburg College, September 9 - October 24, 2015.



“PRAY FOR
THE PEOPLE
WHO FEED YOU”

Voices of Pauper Children
in the Industrial Age



As rapid industrialization and global war transformed the Western world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, those on the margins of society bore the brunt of dislocation. Major demographic shifts from rural to urban areas altered settlement patterns and the traditional social order, as many urban migrants took up dangerous, ill-paying work in mills, factories, and mines, reorienting their lives around the bell that chimed the beginning and end of the workday. Disease, malnutrition, and dangerous working conditions claimed the lives of many, fracturing families and leaving countless children to struggle along without adults to protect them. Other children found themselves abandoned by parents unable or unwilling to take care of them, or sent out to work at a young age to help support parents, grandparents, and younger siblings. The dislocation and privations of war made still others refugees and orphans, struggling to meet basic needs for food, shelter, and education.

These children – frequently exploited, frequently victimized, yet still historical actors in their own right – are the subject of this exhibition at Gettysburg College’s Schmucker Art Gallery. Curated by Rebecca Duffy ’16, a double major in Art History and History, *Pray for the People Who Feed You* foregrounds the experiences and voices of children who were rarely provided an opportunity to speak for themselves but instead often silenced by those who spoke “for” them. The paintings, photographs, illustrations, and documentary records making up the exhibition explore the intersections between depictions of these children’s lives and the realities of child poverty, looking particularly closely at images and descriptions meant to provoke audiences to compassion, empathy, and action.

Charles Dickens’ enormously popular books *Oliver Twist* and *A Christmas Carol* offered exacting critiques of the byproducts of industrialization, and of England’s harsh new Poor Laws, which severely limited the range of options available to impoverished Britons through expanding the workhouse system: a refuge of last resort for those with nowhere else to go. Through creating sympathetic characters such as Oliver and the Cratchit family, Dickens humanized poverty for his audience. The pure-hearted goodness of Oliver and the Cratchits made them the face of the “deserving poor,” infusing their sufferings with nobility and rendering them worthy of assistance. It’s no coincidence that both Oliver and Tiny Tim are children:

Lewis W. Hine, *Bibb Mill No. 1, Macon, Ga.*, 1909.
Photographic print. (glass negative 5 x 7 in.) Library of
Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, National Child
Labor Committee Collection. [LC-DIG-nclc-05394]

innocent, helpless, and dependent. Their travails were meant to evoke pity and prick the conscience of the nation.

Yet in creating such a contrast between his pure-hearted heroes and the corruption, cruelty and suffering around them, Dickens helped to contribute to the popular conception that assistance and compassion should be restricted to those conforming to middle-class expectations of worthiness. He also reinforced the link between the supposed helplessness and dependence of children and the image of the deserving poor.

Minna Cintron's *Grist for the Mill* and the Lewis Hine photographs employ social realism to highlight the contrast between idealized images of childhood as a sheltered, carefree time and the realities of child labor. By juxtaposing the small stature and youthful features of child laborers with their dangerous, oversized workplaces, the Citron and Hine images indict both those who directly profit from children's labor and the broader capitalist society that condones such practices.

In bringing together these pieces, student curator Rebecca Duffy challenges us to consider not only the question of how we ourselves in 21st-century America profit from the exploitation of children, but also how ideas about dependence and virtue can blind us to structural inequality and stifle voices that possess right to speak for themselves. Heartfelt thanks is due to Shannon Egan, Director of Schmucker Art Gallery, who embraced the proposal for this exhibition with enthusiasm, and to Carolyn Sautter, Molly Reynolds, and Amy Lucadamo of Special Collections and College Archives as well as Lauren Roedner at the Adams County Historical Society for their astute guidance and invaluable assistance.

Jill Oglie Titus
Associate Director, Civil War Institute



“PRAY FOR THE PEOPLE WHO FEED YOU”

Voices of Pauper Children in the Industrial Age



Following the Industrial Revolution in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, countries such as the United States and England experienced a widening gap between the rich industrialists and the impoverished working class. As a result, poverty quickly shifted from a localized problem to a national epidemic. Each country was faced with the challenges of addressing and alleviating poverty on a national scale. With a limited amount of resources, questions arose about who should receive relief. What should it look like? How should it be administered? And how would poverty and policy affect political, economic, social and familial structures?

Policy makers sought to “cure” their social disease through economic support systems and workplace standardization legislation. Meanwhile, middle and upper class families offered “salvation” for those burdened with poverty through educational programs and moral guidance. In reality, however, ad hoc private and public relief systems for the impoverished were

laden with their own problems, such as disagreements over actions, false impressions of success, as well as corruption and abuse. There certainly was no easy way to cure or save the impoverished. This exhibition “*Pray for the People That Feed You*”: *Voices of Pauper Children in the Industrial Age* includes paintings, photographs and literary illustrations to reveal the intersections between the depiction of and the realities for children in poverty from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States and Europe. The exhibition also uses artifacts and books from the era to explore Pennsylvania’s efforts at reform in Adams County.

Policy makers and the upper class first began to address the question: with scarce resources, who deserves the aid most? Distanced from the realities of poverty, the upper class aristocrats and emerging middle class extended the hierarchal system which dominated nineteenth-century life, to draw new distinctions within the impoverished class between those whom they considered

the deserving poor (those deserving of aid or help) and the undeserving poor (those who did not deserve aid). It became commonplace to attribute unemployment of able-bodied adults to immorality, laziness, and vice. From the eyes of the upper classes, capable adults should be either looking for a job or working, which would ameliorate their own situation. They should not need help. Meanwhile, children and the elderly were not blamed for their impoverished position. It was not their fault if their caretakers were immoral or lazy. They deserved better care; they deserved the chance to be successful. Policy and charity grew from this distinction. The dichotomy, however, was not this simple; families were comprised of many age groups and abilities. Therefore, economic insecurity within the lower class during this era challenged not just politics, social stratification, and economics, but also the structure of the family and the role of the child within it.

In the nineteenth century children were no longer helping on the family farm, but were sent away to work in the factories of wealthy industrialists for twelve to fifteen hours a day. For the first time society began to wonder: what is childhood? Could it be more than just the biological stage between infancy and adulthood? Was there more to being a child than just acting as a miniature adult? Perhaps there was a value to the carefree jubilation children exhibit. Perhaps there

was a reason for play and time with the family. And if the significance of childhood rests in the social construct, then who deserves it? Does this dynamic affect the structure of the family? Are the solutions dictated by charity, or are the policies inadvertently creating a new social woe?¹ Policy makers and the aristocracy had different answers to these questions, but both adopted the poor child as their symbol; they sought to cure poverty that ravaged the innocent rather than that which shadowed the foul-hearted. As a result, impoverished children became the primary beneficiaries in the emerging early welfare programs in both the United States and the United Kingdom: the British Workhouse and the American charity systems. Policies including the Education Acts in England, regulations on orphanages and children's homes, and Child Labor Laws provided children with schooling and safer living and working conditions to alleviate poverty.

This ideology of guidance for the young and deserving is reflected in the architecture of the Workhouse, the language of policies, and particular works of art in this era. The expansion and general prosperity of the upper classes in this period between 1880 and 1914 in both the United States and the United Kingdom led to an exponential growth of the arts. In an effort both to consider contemporary social issues and also to entertain upper class audiences, many



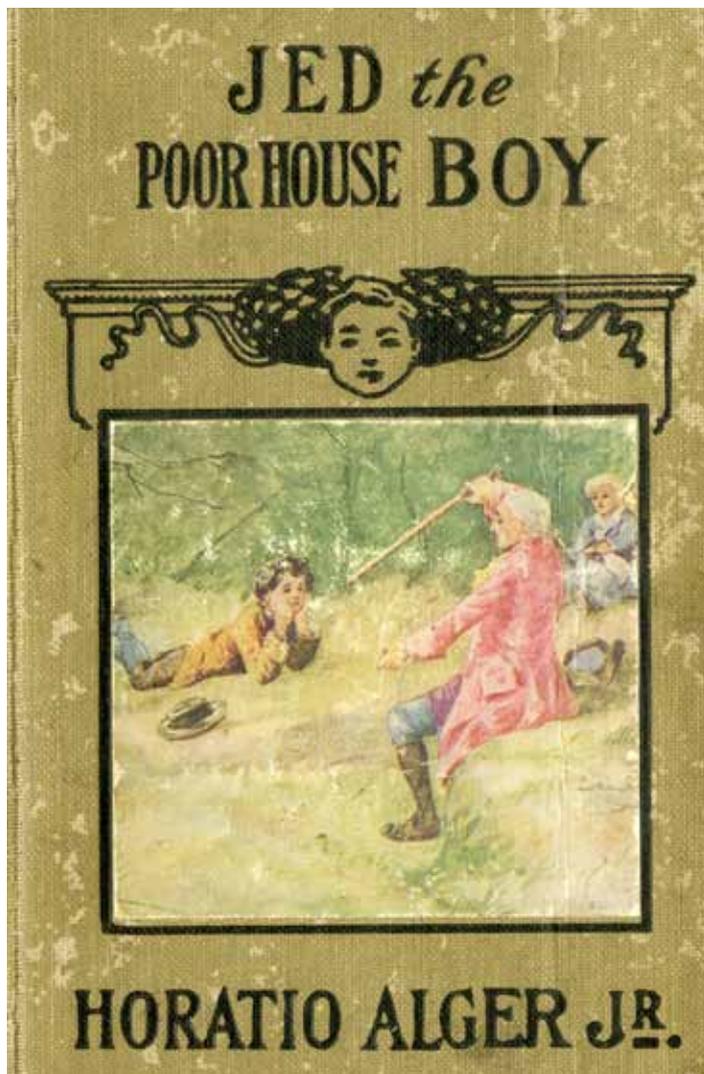
George Cruikshank. *Oliver asking for More*, in Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist, or The Parish Boy's Progress* (Originally published in London in serial form in Bentley's Miscellany February 1837-March 1839 and as a novel in 1838; the exhibited reproduction is from *The Adventures of Oliver Twist*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978). 4.5 x 3.5 in. Special Collections/Musselman Library, Gettysburg College

John Leech. *Ignorance and Want*, in Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*. (appears in London: Chapman & Hall, 1843; the exhibited image is from *Christmas Books*. London: Chapman & Hall, ca. 1880). Steel engraving. 3.5 x 2.7 in. Gift of Richard Fayman. Special Collections/Musselman Library, Gettysburg College

poets, fiction writers, painters, and photographers chose the new notion of childhood as their subject matter. Through their plotlines and illustrations, the rags-to-riches tales of Horatio Alger, Jr. and the adventures of Charles Dickens and Mark Twain illustrate how an impoverished child can achieve—with moral guidance and hard work—a higher social status. The figures in the illustrations for *Oliver Twist* and *A Christmas Carol* appear youthful, but not full of life. The boys' bodies, constructed from tight, dark lines, appear hunched over. Their clothes are tattered; their pants are too short, and their features are elongated to emphasize their thinness. These depictions, and those of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Jed, the Poorhouse Boy* embody the period's stereotype of a pauper child. Their exaggerated, fragile features garner compassion from the upper class; they seem to beg for salvation. These stories attend to an idealized upper class goal, a willingness and ability to teach morals, manners, and religion to youth to save fragile bodies and minds from poverty.

It is perhaps partially because of these idealized stories that encouraged the muckrakers near the turn of the century. Seeking to represent the world of the poor more accurately, investigative reporters such as Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine captured their version of reality in quantitative notes and expository photographs. Hine published several series of photographs presenting children in the

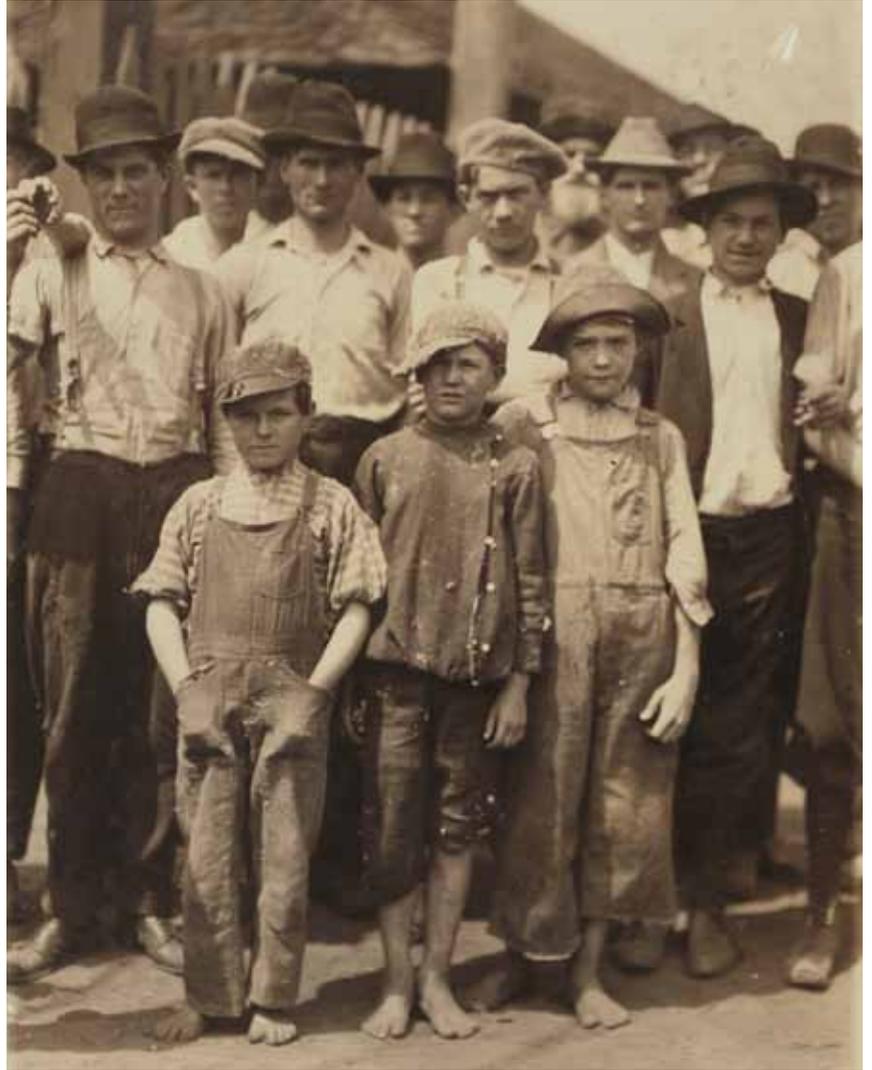
Cover applique for Horatio Alger Jr., *Jed, the Poorhouse Boy*. (Chicago: M. A. Donahue, 1911). Color print, 3.25 x 3.5 in. Gift of Robert Eastlack, Class of 1970. Special Collections/Musselman Library, Gettysburg College





Lewis W. Hine, *Manuel, the Young Shrimp-Picker, Biloxi, Mississippi*, 1911. Photographic print. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, National Child Labor Committee Collection, [LC-DIG-nclc-00828]

Lewis W. Hine, *Noon Hour at Massachusetts Mill*,
Lindale, Ga., 1913. Photographic print. Library of Congress,
Prints & Photographs Division, National Child Labor
Committee Collection. [LC-DIG-nclc-02761]



In Darkest England and the Way Out: Salvation Army Social Campaign, In William Booth. *In Darkest England and the Way Out*. (London: International Headquarters of the Salvation Army, 1890). Lithograph, 14 x 10 in. From the Estate of Professor Basil L. Crapster. Special Collections/Musselman Library, Gettysburg College

William H. Tipton, *Soldiers' Orphans' Home - Children at Play*, ca. 1880. Photographic print. William H. Tipton Collection, Adams County Historical Society



Yet, Hine's photographs do not give the viewer the satisfaction of Alger's or Twain's happy ending. These photographs demand that the audience imagine the ending for themselves; the works in a way implore the viewer to rescue these children themselves. Hine conveys a reality where most of these children are not yet saved, where the crusade against poverty must continue and is not merely a fantastical entertainment for middle class readers.

The gap between representations and realities of poverty and the question of the immorality of poverty continued into the sphere of charitable and religious based relief. In a *Salvation Army Social Campaign* lithograph published in 1890 in General William Booth's *In Darkest England and the Way Out*, the Salvation Army is represented as a lighthouse, a beacon of hope amongst the sea of misery. The sea is labeled with "waves" of immorality: starvation, drunkenness, unemployment, and prison. Individuals are shown drowning within it. Salvation Army volunteers pull the victims from the sea towards the lighthouse, which illuminates the path to a plethora of solutions and charitable organizations, including women's homes and employment efforts in cities. While it is not clear whether some figures are rescued over others because they are more deserving, it is clear that morality taught through charities was considered a "cure" for poverty.

In regards to legislation, the book *History of Poor Relief Legislation in Pennsylvania 1682-1913* by William Clinton Heffner outlines a broad range of initiatives for adults and children alike; however, the concept regarding the significance of morality and virtue as a solution for amelioration of childhood poverty are evident in policy as well.³ The Pennsylvania state legislature established homes for the children of Civil War soldiers. The *Annual Report of the Pennsylvania Commission of Soldier's Orphan Schools* was released every few years by the government and contained exemplar forms and regulations orphanages used to keep records and to ensure fair treatment of the children. For example, displayed in this exhibition is a certificate which was to be filled out for each child who outgrew the orphanage, ensuring that the child had behaved and learned proper morals. The orphans could then show this certificate to a prospective employer to guarantee that their learning has rescued them from the depths of immoral poverty.

The realities of charitable organizations, however, indicate the propagandistic quality of the books and lithographs. The Homestead, a soldiers' orphanage in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, for instance, had a notorious reputation for child abuse.⁴ The Homestead opened in 1866 to provide a home for the children of fallen Civil War soldiers. For the earlier portion of its life, it provided a comfortable home for

children and performed at the government's standard teaching manners and skills. However, just ten years after the Homestead was opened, Matron Rosa Carmichael was found guilty of assaulting a child. In the following year accusations of abuse continued to arise, including the allegation that Carmichael had chained the children up in the basement as punishment. Carmichael was convicted in 1876 and the orphanage closed in 1877.⁵ These children clearly did not experience the newly crafted notion of a childhood protected from hardship. They did not receive enough food. They did not even receive the moral lessons guaranteed by the government, which were considered part of the solution to relieve poverty and its presence in the future. Quite simply, the Homestead was not a home for these children.

The exhibition considers how issues of children in poverty continued into the twentieth century with Minna Citron's painting *Grist for the Mill* (1934). Citron's work captures the complexities of the gap between the idealized opportunities of the illustrations and Hine's harsh realities, in the context of the Great Depression. The widespread and sudden poverty resulting from the Great Depression acted as the ultimate test of the new policies and programs as well as the recent social construction of childhood. Here, Citron depicts two young boys sitting on the sidewalk absorbed in the newspapers they had been selling. Their clothing clearly

suggests they are impoverished. Their pants are patched; there are holes in the boys' socks, and their coats are much too big. These boys exist somewhere between the exaggerated, languid children illustrated in the nineteenth-century novels and the hardened, adult-like children of Hine's photographs. Their bodies are not elongated and dark; instead, Citron paints them more naturalistically. Though they are pale and thin, their faces are lit, and they are engaged whole-heartedly in reading. With downcast eyes and pursed lips, they intently read the newspapers. Citron's painting at first appears slightly humorous, as one expects this kind of concentration from adult readers, not newsboys. Meanwhile, as they sit atop a stack of unread papers, one can almost hear the cry of the young newsboys, the shouts of headlines, and the chatter between the boys about their articles. As a result, the viewer is forced to wonder: can these boys really read? Do they understand the social irony of their articles? While one article describes Babe Ruth's astronomical paycheck, the other is entitled "Child Slayer: Hair Raising Details [of the] Murder" and likely alludes to the contemporaneous kidnapping of Charles Lindbergh's infant son.⁶ The emphasis on one man's wealth in the 1930s as the headline of one paper and the kidnapping of a white millionaire's baby by a German immigrant of the other headline indicates the social bedlam resulting from the Great



Minna Citron. *Grist for the Mill*, 1934. Acrylic on Masonite.
24 x 28 in. Gift of Thomas and Virginia Citron. Class of 1947.
Special Collections/Musselman Library. Gettysburg College



Depression. Despite Babe Ruth's charitable efforts and frequent visits to orphanages, most impoverished children were unable to escape their birth status. Meanwhile, new fear struck the families of the wealthy as the Lindbergh baby's catastrophe indicated that not even the children of the rich were entirely safe or guaranteed a "childhood." If not even the children of the wealthy were safe, what did that mean for the others? What did that mean for these impoverished newsboys? For the child workers? Citron's boys do not directly confront the viewer regarding the relationship between the headlines and their own lives. Unlike the Hine photos, the boys are afforded a brief moment of leisure. But, their poverty is still seen in marked contrast to the wealth of Ruth or Lindbergh.

As seemingly literate and apparently healthier than the children Hine pictured, the boys in Citron's painting advocate the significance of education in the mitigation of poverty, rather than just exposing conditions. Because the boys do not face the viewer the way Hine's children do, the title of the work, *Grist for the Mill*, utilizes a contemporaneous idiom to subtly remind viewers of the reality of conditions for children. Grist is corn brought to the mill to be ground into flour. When farmers would say they were bringing "grist for the mill," they meant that their corn would be turned to profit. Later, the phrase became used to describe anything that may potentially garner a profit.

Therefore, when she uses this expression as the title of this work, she asks the viewer to consider the idea of the “profitability of children.” Thus, the painting still questions the sanctity of childhood and poverty of children; however, Citron’s painting further considers the impact of industrialists’ greed on children, instead of the benevolence of industrialists willing to rescue children from the poverty effectuated by the immorality of their parents. Perhaps because her work supervened the series of Hine’s displayed here by nearly two decades and was created in the midst of the Great Depression, she conveys a less idyllic reality and suggests a less prejudiced solution: literacy, rather than morality.

The reality of life for children was much different than the ideal goals of policy makers and the depictions of

the rich saving the weak and helpless. However, just as the viewer cannot actually hear the boys’ gasps or shouts through Citron’s painting, the voices of the impoverished children were rarely heard. Their realities were ignored in part because their destitution proved too great a contrast to the prosperity industrialization had brought to the middle and upper classes. Many of the efforts to alleviate poverty challenged social, political, economic, and familial structures, just as these complex relationships continue to perplex activists and policy makers today. Its total extinction begged a seemingly impossible, complete reorganization of society. Rather than truly suggesting change, the new literary and visual representations of the salvation of pauper children assuaged any guilt of the aristocracy. The reality, however, was that the children, employed as workers, were

continuously exploited for financial gains for this aristocracy. The child’s figure, as fragile, as a symbol of a new notion that childhood should and could be protected, emerged in the Industrial Age. Works of art and literature, as well as policies and documents, suggest complex relationships between birth status and opportunity and the evolving rhetoric surrounding despair and hope. As a result, depictions of impoverished children used to support idealized policies reveal only a muted version of the difficulties experienced by real children.

Rebecca Duffy ’16

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- 1 Walter I. Trattner, *From Poor Law to Welfare State, 6th Edition: A History of Social Welfare in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1999).
 - 2 Deborah L. Smith-Shank, “Lewis Hine and His Photo Stories: Visual Culture and Social Reform,” *Art Education* 56 (March 2003): 33–37.
 - 3 William Clinton Hefner, *History of Poor Relief Legislation in Pennsylvania, 1682-1913* (Cleona, PA: Holzapfel Publishing Company, 1913).
 - 4 Ruth Collins and Cindy Stouffer, *One Soldier’s Legacy: The National Homestead at Gettysburg* (Gettysburg, PA: Thomas Pubns, 1996), 61–62. According to Collins and Stouffer, “Children were kept in the cellar of the Homestead for days at a time. The cell was five feet deep, eight feet wide, and four feet high. There was no ventilation or light, and the children were shackled to the wall.”
 - 5 Collins and Stouffer, *One Soldier’s Legacy*, 64. See also Catherine Reef, *Alone in the World: Orphans and Orphanages in America* (New York: Clarion Books 2005), 68–73, 80.
 - 6 Jennifer Streb, *Minna Citron: A Socio-Historical Study of an Artist’s Feminist Social Realism in the 1930s* (PhD Dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 2004).

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“PRAY FOR THE PEOPLE WHO FEED YOU”

Voices of Pauper Children in the Industrial Age

CURATED BY REBECCA DUFFY '16

SEPTEMBER 9 – OCTOBER 24, 2015

GALLERY TALK:

OCTOBER 2, 5 PM.

RECEPTION TO FOLLOW UNTIL 7 PM

COVER: Minna Citron, *Grist for the Mill*, 1934. Acrylic on Masonite, 24 x 28 in. Gift of Thomas and Virginia Citron, Class of 1947. Special Collections/Musselman Library, Gettysburg College

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