Escape: An Analysis of Poverty in Identity

Roland Barthes once said, “The photographic image…is a message without a code,” (“Roland Barthes”). Photography has the ability to capture a moment. In one image it can not only show what the subject is doing, but it can also tell a story. A photographer has the ability to use various elements to give details into not only what the subject is experiencing, but also how the photographer feels about a particular situation. In 2012, a photo collection was released entitled “America’s Poorest County: Proud Appalachians Who Live without Running Water or Power in a Region Where 40% Fall Below the Poverty Line.” The collection captured the lives of those in Owsley, Kentucky, where many live without basic necessities such as water and electricity. This area has the lowest average income in the country. The collection attempted to capture their lives and give an insight into their daily struggles and how they cope with their financial and societal situations. It showed how destitute families are attempting to escape their futile reality and live an ordinary life. The collection especially focused on children and teenagers who were attempting to live a “normal” childhood regardless of their economic situation.

In the photograph entitled Childhood, a young boy, approximately nine years old, is sitting in an old, worn, brown kitchen chair. He is playing at a tiny white kitchen table with several small cars and figurines. He is surrounded by a dirty and cluttered kitchen. The walls are encased in old, dark brown paneling and the counters are covered with dirty and mismatched
dishes. The cabinets, which do not match one another and what were once white and clean, are now covered with years of dirt and grime. Cast iron pans hang on the wall enveloped in dust from not being used. The windows are plastered with cobwebs allowing very little light in and the floor looks black and soiled with stacks of logs most likely used for heating. There are also a few of the child’s art pieces hanging above the pans on the wall. The little boy is centered in the photograph with everything around him appearing to be old and dusty. He is barefoot and has a stoic expression on his face as he stares directly at the photographer.

The little boy seems to be mentally attempting to escape the surroundings of his uncle’s house. The modest light in the photograph is coming in through a dusty and cobweb covered window. The lack of light creates a shadow so only half of the room and the boy’s face are illuminated. The side of his face that is lit is also the side with the toys, while the dark side is where a majority of the clutter and filth of the room is. This acts as a contrast, as it displays the light of his imagination and the darkness of his reality. By capturing him playing with his cars, it portrays how he is using his imagination to escape his situation. Being in the center of the photograph, he is the central focus. However, by capturing the entire room, it portrays how his life is entirely surrounded by the poverty he is living in. The photographer also captured his solemn face as he looks directly at the camera, as if drawing him away from his play world and back to the reality that encircles him. Doing so, the photographer created a sense that the boy is aware of the situation he is living in and understands the harsh reality he is facing every day. Even at a young age, he knows that this, most likely, is his dark future.

The photograph *A Grand Affair* exhibits a young girl getting ready for her high school prom. She is toward the left side of the photograph dressed in a blue and white prom dress. Her hair is done and she is looking down and to the left as final touches are applied. Two other
people are fixing the bottom of her dress; one appears to be her mother and the other is possibly a younger sister. A teenage boy is sitting off to the side observing the preparations. The room is mostly empty except for a dark, old wood stove on the right. There are two sets of washers and dryers behind the stove and laundry is piled on top of one of the washers with a folding metal chair in front of it. The walls are covered in aged, dingy, flowered wallpaper that is peeling off and the ceiling is dusty and has a large crack across it. One wall has no wallpaper on it and the dirty drywall is exposed. There are two small windows in the back where light is coming through.

The girl’s attention demonstrates how she is ignoring her current situation and is instead escaping her reality by preparing for the dance. She is looking downward at her dress instead of at the camera. It creates the idea that she is focused on looking perfect for this moment and taking this chance to be someone else. She is engrossed in the moment and does not have to concentrate on the circumstances around her. Unlike the little boy who sees the camera as an invasion to his imagination, the girl is too caught up to be brought out of it. There is a contrast of her looking beautiful with her hair and dress, yet being surrounded by an almost empty, run down house. The house is mostly dark with the light mainly centered on her. This is comparable to the young boy. The brightness signifies their hope while the darkness is the hard reality they are facing each day. By presenting the old stove, peeling wallpaper, and cracked ceiling it greatly contrasts the newness and beauty of her. Similar to *Childhood*, the surrounding area of both children depicts their poor living conditions. It shows how it encases all aspects of their lives no matter how they try to escape it. This also appears to be a family affair with these particular people surrounding her and focusing on the opportunity of this moment rather than thinking
about their reality. It appears that a sister and mother are both working on her dress to make sure all is right while the brother is looking on and not wanting to miss out on the special occasion.

Like the photograph *A Grand Affair*, the photograph *A Day to Remember* captures the moment of two teenagers and their high school prom. In this photograph, a teenage boy and girl are walking into the school gym. They are in the center of the photograph but more toward the mid-ground. The couple has their back to the camera as they are walking away from the photographer and into the gym. The boy is wearing a white suit and the girl has on a long silver dress. The gym floor is covered with a large black tarp, but around the edges of the photograph, the wood and lettering of the floor is still exposed. On either side of the couple, there are black, white, and silver balloons on the floor creating an elegant aisle for them to walk through. Above the couple is the gym’s basketball hoop and to the right, the wooden bleachers are folded up. To the left of the photo, the bleachers are unfolded and the families and parents of the students are sitting on them clustered together watching the couples come in. The walls are undecorated with only the scoreboards and sports banners up and the fluorescent ceiling lights are shining down on the students and families.

This photograph also demonstrates the idea of escaping reality. Similar to *A Grand Affair*, the teens are not looking at the photographer. The couple instead is walking away which could represent the idea that they are walking away from their current situation and are heading into a fantasy world. For one night they do not have to worry about their home lives and what tomorrow will bring. By not looking directly at the camera in both photographs, it demonstrates how these teens are caught up in the excitement of the moment. This is their opportunity to escape their current life situations and use the night as a chance to experience something that may never occur again. This contrasts with the boy in *Childhood* looking directly at the
The cameraman; his facial expression shows how emotionally upset he is about being pulled away from his imagination and back into his current situation. It is as if, even at such a young age, he is aware of how futile his future will be and feels sad about it. The teens though, understand what their futures hold and are trying their best to temporarily forget about it. They have come to terms that this is their life and unlike the boy, they cannot be disturbed when a distraction is available. With the teens being centered in the photograph, this allows the photographer to capture not only the teens, but the gym and family around them. By having the gym floor and basketball hoop exposed around the edges of the photograph, it illustrates that although they are currently experiencing a fun filled fantasy night, their real world still surrounds them at all times. The way the photographer captures the families on the sidelines portrays how the families are also benefitting from this opportunity to escape into this dream world for awhile. It confirms how much the parents support their children by giving them the opportunity to escape from their current life situation, even if only for a night. The parents are also using their children’s special night as an escape for a short time before they too must return to their lives. Similar to the photograph *Childhood*, the lighting reveals the darkness of the folded bleachers and the brightness of the families’ seating area. This contrast of light and dark once again shows the contrast of reality and a more desired life style. These children in poverty are living in a split world. They are stuck in the darkness but dreaming of living in the light.

The collection of these three photographs represent how despite living in poverty, people still find ways to continue on with their lives and find occasional times to escape their hardships. The photographer’s choice of positioning of the subjects in these photos reflects their way of thinking. They are attempting to convey a deeper meaning of how these children deal with their life situation. Unlike the typical child, these children are facing an extremely tough life. They are
using any opportunity they can to break free from it for awhile. The lighting in all of these photographs displays this idea with the light and dark contrasting that is used. The darkness is the destitution and impoverishment that they endure everyday and the lightness is an expression of their hope and anticipation that they can escape their dark reality, even if only for a short time. Through these elements of attention to the camera, positioning, and lighting used in the photographs, there is the consciousness of how much poverty is affecting people’s lives. It surrounds every aspect of their being and the impact on them is reflected by their need to attempt an escape from it.
Works Cited


