



'Flashes from the Slums': Aesthetics and Social Justice in Arthur Morrison

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Abstract: "'Flashes from the Slums': Aesthetics and Social Justice in Arthur Morrison' is a reappraisal of the late-Victorian slum writer Arthur Morrison. This article places Morrison in conversation with both Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838) and with late 19th-century photography, most notably that of American Jacob Riis. Attention to the formal aspects of Morrison's work, in particular the aesthetic influence of flash photography, reveals that Morrison's politics are more progressive than has been seen to date.

Keywords: Arthur Morrison, *A Child of the Jago*, flash photography, Jacob Riis, *Oliver Twist*

The novels of late-Victorian slum novelist Arthur Morrison have been under-appreciated due in large part to critical assessments that his contempt for his characters is politically uncomfortable. Critics in Morrison's own time felt that he was unsympathetic to his subjects. This misconception has persisted to the present day, with current critics reading his novels as embarrassing condemnations of the degenerate lower classes. This paper is largely an apology for Morrison, though I by no means want to suggest that Morrison's politics were impeccable. Rather, attention to the formal aspects of his work reveals a deep desire to alleviate and ameliorate the conditions of the poorest in society, though at times obstructed by his own conflicts and despair.

We can arrive at a more accurate reading of the intersection between Morrison's artistic views and his politics through an examination of two predominant influences:

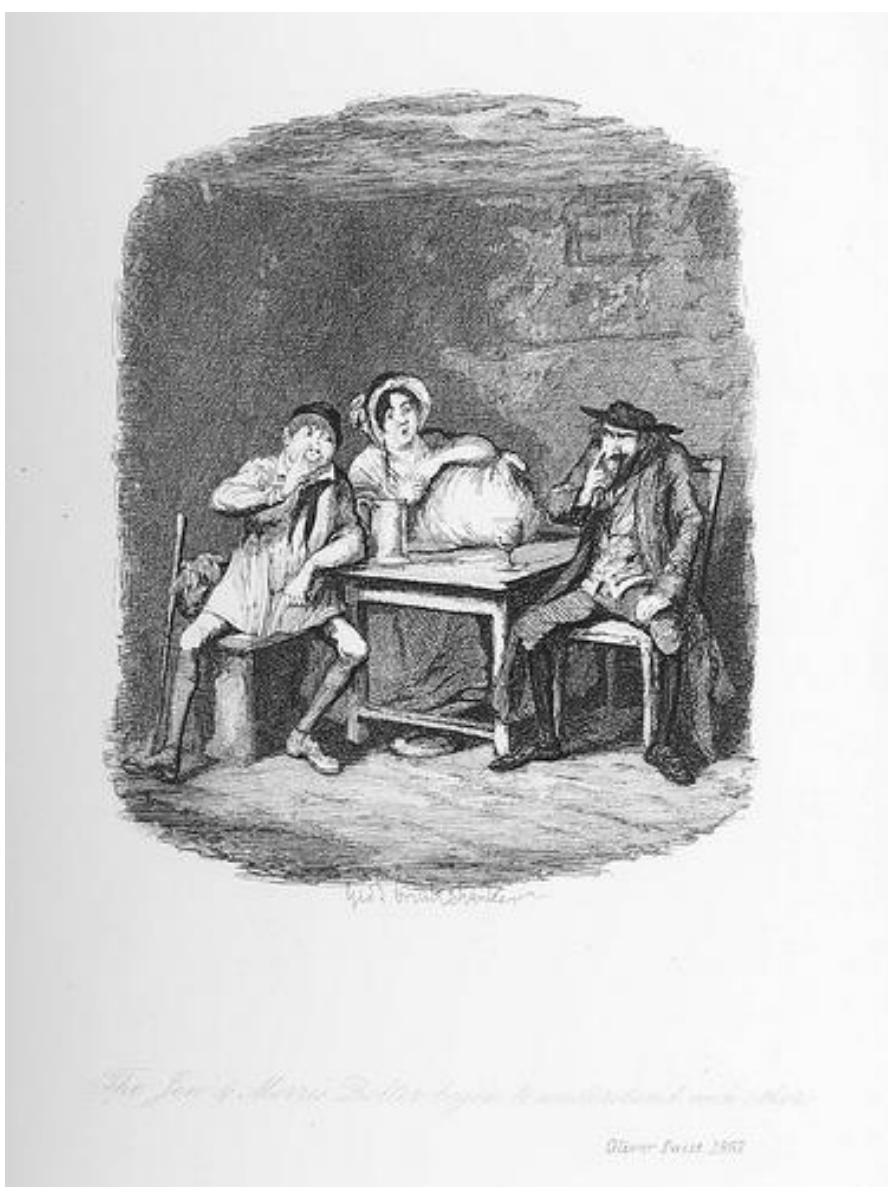
from the past, the socially progressive writings of Charles Dickens, and contemporaneously, the emerging technologies of urban photography. First, I will look at the way Morrison revises the progressive politics of *Oliver Twist* (1838) in his novel, *A Child of the Jago* (1896). Through Morrison's revision of *Oliver Twist*, we see that Morrison shares with Dickens a sympathy for the urban poor, even if this sympathy has evolved to become more cynical in the almost 60 years between the two novels. Second, I will explore the question of Morrison's politics through his aesthetics. Morrison had a great interest in the visual arts, particularly photographic technology (and later in life, in Japanese painting). Emerging photographic technologies, especially the advent of the flash, allowed for new formal possibilities, which in turn informed (and were inspired by) Morrison's literary representations. These two questions – of politics and form – prove inseparable. Morrison's theories of art, and the correspondence between realism and photography in the late-19th century, can help us to understand his social and political positions.

A Child of the Jago is the story of a boy, Dicky Perrott, and his doomed struggle to escape being a member of the criminal underclass. After the fence Aaron Weech sabotages Dicky's attempt at legal employment, Dicky's father Josh kills Weech and is executed for the crime. In an epilogue, we see a grown up Dicky die when he is knifed in a gang fight. Morrison aims for as faithful a representation of the slums as he can achieve. To this end he incorporates slang of the period into his novel, as when he describes the more prosperous gangsters, clothed in 'the original out and out downy benjamins, or the celebrated bang-up kicksies, cut saucy' (97). His aim is to take an unflinching look at the worst conditions of the slums, and he offended some readers by treating criminal practices such as cosh-carrying – when a woman picks up a drunk man, takes him back to her room, where her husband knocks him out with an iron rod, or 'cosh', and they rob him. (Josh does not carry a cosh, which causes the women of the neighbourhood to feel that Dicky's mother is pretentious.) Along the way, Morrison satirises the pathetically ineffective and self-aggrandising religious and civic missions to reform the slums.

The Jago of the title is the 'Old Jago', a slum based on London's Old Nichol. It was possibly named after the reformer the Reverend Arthur Osborne Jay, the original for the novel's Father Sturt. (The pragmatic and tough Father Sturt is the only heroic reformer in the novel and an illustration of the late-Victorian trend of 'muscular Christianity'.) Sources for *The Child of the Jago* include Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the People* (1889) and Reverend Jay's own *Life in Darkest London* (1891), both documentary accounts of the slums. Morrison also spent time in the Old Nichol and relied upon his journalistic background to report on the slums for *A Child of the Jago*, but he hid his other credentials for telling this story: that he himself was a child of the East End (Keating). The critical tradition, then, has been to read Morrison's novel as an example of his own 'class humiliation' (Fox 117). Read through the lens of Morrison's reactions to the influence of Charles Dickens on the one hand and urban slum photographers such as America's Jacob Riis on the other, *A Child of the Jago* more clearly offers up a social critique that exonerates the slum dwellers and indicts Morrison's own middle-class readership.

Criminal Characters in Dickens and Morrison – Some Correspondences

The correspondences between *A Child of the Jago* and *Oliver Twist* are numerous. For this essay I will restrict myself to an analysis of the novel's treatment of two stock figures of the criminal class – the fence and the burglar turned murderer. Both Dickens and Morrison include the character of the corrupting Jewish fence, with Morrison's Aaron Weech a close imitation of Dickens's Fagin. Morrison and Jay insisted that Weech was not Jewish, but it seems certain that Morrison had a Jewish character in mind. The East End of London had a large Jewish population, as critics David Feldman and Ellen Ross have noted, albeit a population that, as Feldman notes, largely eschewed the poor relief available to residents. Peter Miles compares Aaron Weech's 'tapping of the forefinger beside the nose' (39) to Cruikshank's picture of Fagin making the same gesture ('The Jew and Morris Bolter begin to understand Each Other') and notes the similarity of the first meeting between Dicky and Weech to the first meeting of Oliver and Fagin.



George Cruikshank. 'The Jew and Morris Bolter Begin to Understand Each Other', 1867.

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Collections, Saratoga
Springs, NY. Flickr: Lucy
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Where Fagin woos Oliver with sausages and hot gin and water, Weech brings Dicky into his shop for cake and 'cawfy' (37). In both cases the boys are more vulnerable to corruption because of their privation from both food and sympathy: Morrison writes that for Dicky, 'It was the first time he had been given anything, kindly and ungrudgingly' (38). (Morrison will again revisit Fagin in *The Hole in the Wall*, when Stevy awakens just in time to see his grandfather going through a stolen cashbox, echoing the scene in which the half-awake Oliver observes Fagin with his treasure box.) As J. Hillis Miller has pointed out, even Fagin in Dickens is treated with compassion (68). Still, readers have long been concerned with the anti-Semitism in Dickens's novel. In Morrison's treatment of the same figure even the sympathy Dickens extended to Fagin is lacking – Weech is a caricature entirely deserving of his violent end. Besides being morally repugnant the one-dimensionality of this character is a major narrative flaw in the novel.

If Morrison is less forgiving of his fence character, he is more forgiving of his murderer. Morrison's Josh Perrott echoes Dickens's Bill Sikes. When Josh first appears in the text he arrives home with a club with blood and hair sticking to it, an overt reminder of Sikes's gory club immediately after the murder of Nancy. Still, though his career is similar, Perrott does not have Sikes's innate wickedness. Both men are burglars turned murderers, but Morrison's treatment of Josh Perrott shows a much deeper scepticism about the problem of justice in response to poverty and criminality. When Bill murders Nancy he is entirely villainous. When Josh Perrott murders Weech our reaction is more complicated because Weech is such an ugly character. (Imagine an *Oliver Twist* where Sikes murders Fagin for corrupting children.)

In a description that prefigures and inspires Morrison's use of light and darkness, Dickens uses the sun both to reveal and to purify the scene of Nancy's murder. Sikes is exposed to the reality of his actions in a cosmic illumination from which he cannot hide and that encapsulates Dickens's narrative method, with its emphasis on revelation, frames and mimesis:

The sun – the bright sun, that brings back, not light alone, but new life, and hope, and freshness to man – burst upon the crowded city in clear and radiant glory. Through costly-coloured glass and paper-mended window, through cathedral dome and rotten crevice, it shed its equal ray. It lighted up the room where the murdered woman lay. It did. If the sight had been a ghastly one in the dull morning, what was it, now, in all that brilliant light! (423)

The sun coming through a variety of window frames brings moral revelation. Sikes, who has been 'under cover of darkness' (423) in the alienated sphere at the centre of London's core, is suddenly confronted by his own brutality. Dickens's artistic method, like the sun, reveals that which has been hidden, as a window into the lower-class world that Sikes and Nancy inhabit. Sikes can now see his actions through the illuminated views of Dickens's middle-class readers, a morality that thereby becomes transcendent.

In Morrison, on the other hand, there is no similarly transcendent morality, and where Dickens has a purifying sun, Morrison has only a lantern to represent fallible justice: 'The flash of a bull's eye dazzled [Perrott]' (158). (In yet another homage to *Oliver Twist*, a bull's eye lantern illuminates the murder Perrott commits, while the

murder that Sikes commits is witnessed by Bull's-eye, the dog.) Here, there are consequences, but not revelation, as the lesser light of the policeman's lantern replaces the sun. Unlike in Dickens, however, this strict adherence to the ugly truth, though morally necessary in its own right, does not have transformative power.

Despite their similarities, the difference between the audience's reactions (both the reading audience and the audience within the text) to the two murderers is great, and it is in this comparison we can see Morrison actually extending the social tolerance Dickens began in depictions of more sympathetic poor criminals like Nancy and the Artful Dodger. Sikes is indefensible. Nancy Weston calls him 'Dickens's most unequivocally evil villain' (189). On the other hand, Richard Benvenuto has shown how the moral system of the slum applauds some of Perrott's actions (winning a street fight, for example) even as respectable society condemns him (155-57). When Perrott is hanged, it feels pointless. It is not so much that Morrison thinks it is wrong to hang Perrott, but that doing so goes nowhere near the root of the problem, which is not Perrott's own criminality, but the corrupt bigger system. Perrott himself reflects, bemusedly, 'He had done many a worse thing, he said, that had been less thought of' (163). In comparison to Sikes' dramatic accidental hanging in front of a justice-hungry crowd, Perrott's execution is anticlimactic and pathetic:

It was but a little crowd that stood at the Old Bailey corner while the bell tolled, to watch for the black flag. This was not a popular murder. Josh Perrott was not a man who had been bred to better things; he did not snivel and rant in the dock; and he had not butchered his wife nor his child, nor anybody with a claim on his gratitude or affection; so that nobody sympathised with him, nor got up a petition for pardon, nor wrote tearful letters to the newspapers. And the crowd that watched for the black flag was a small one, and half of it came from the Jago. (169)

Unlike Dickens's illuminated room, here there is no community or transcendent moral revelation that is achieved by justice. The middle-class readers who might provide the moral outrage do not hear about this murder and execution, or they do not pay attention to it – Morrison cynically suggests that Perrott is not evil *enough* for anyone to want to defend him.¹ While he doesn't condone Josh Perrott's actions, Morrison's treatment of crime and punishment reflects scepticism about the possibility, likelihood or relevance of justice.

D.A. Miller, in his classic study of criminal justice in the Victorian novel, *The Novel and the Police*, has observed that 'The closed-circuit character of delinquency is, of course, a sign of Dickens's progressive attitude, his willingness to see coercive system where it was traditional only to see bad morals' (5). By 'the closed-circuit character of delinquency', Miller refers to a social system that, while purporting to fight crime and delinquency, actually reinforces it: in *Oliver Twist*, for example, the workhouse that is supposed to relieve the situation of the orphans in fact profits from their existence. (Or, as Brecht cynically shows in *The Threepenny Opera*, the police rely on criminals for their livelihood.) In Dickens, thieves and prostitutes such as the Artful Dodger or Nancy are deserving of help and sympathy, as they are what they are because of a corrupt and unjust society. For Miller, this is what makes Dickens progressive. Dickens's treatment of his characters is informed by a distinction

between what Slavoj Žižek would call 'subjective' and 'systemic' violence. Subjective violence refers to individual acts of violence that we might fear – getting mugged or murdered, for example. Systemic violence refers to the structures of society that create that subjective violence. The media, Žižek argues, urge us to focus on subjective violence in order to distract us from systemic violence. In order to determine whether or not Morrison extends Dickens's progressive politics, it is necessary to examine whether Morrison condemns the systemic, and not just the subjective violence of the slums. Through an analysis of his own discussions of *A Child of the Jago*, and an analysis of his aesthetic practices as revealed by his references to the visual arts, I will show that he does.

Aesthetics and Social Justice

One strong association between Dickens and Morrison – perhaps the reason for the strength of Morrison's debt to Dickens – is that both men had a similar view of the relationship between art and social justice. The dichotomy between social justice and aesthetics is a forgone conclusion of modern criticism, but it was not so for Morrison. In fact, my contention is that Morrison's work overall, and *A Child of the Jago* in particular, are explicit explorations of the inseparability of aesthetic and social concerns.

Despite its sensationalistic impact, Dickens represents his work in *Oliver Twist* as strictly journalistic *reportage*. In his Preface, he tries to differentiate his work from romantic portrayals of thieves (he has in mind Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*) and promote a realistic representation that will be more socially relevant:

Here are no canterings on moonlit heaths, no merry-makings in the snugget of all possible caverns, none of the attractions of dress, no embroidery, no lace, no jack-boots, no crimson coats and ruffles, none of the dash and freedom with which 'the road' has been time out of mind invested. The cold wet shelterless streets of London; the foul and frowsy dens, where vice is closely packed and lacks the room to turn; the haunts of hunger and disease; the shabby rags that scarcely hold together; where are the attractions of these things? (34-35)

Dickens views mimetic faithfulness in pictures of crime and poverty as socially beneficial. Instead of the pleasure that we might have from reading an exciting novel about thieves, in this Preface Dickens wants us to see *Oliver Twist* as the result of a stern moral duty. Readers have understandably been sceptical of Dickens's profession here, however (see, for instance, Collins 261-3.)

On the other hand, critics have seen Morrison as lacking sympathy towards the people he depicts – of not wanting to help them, but rather to exterminate them. Kevin Swafford and John L. Kijinski put forth readings wherein representations of the 'grotesque' and 'deviant' serve to reassure Morrison's middle-class readership that the slums are a place completely removed from English respectability, Kijinski arguing that Morrison represents his subjects as 'aliens' comparable to those readers would find in ethnographies of Africa (Swafford 58, Kijinski 494; see also McKean 29, 35-44). Swafford condemns Morrison for the lack of sympathy he shows towards the characters he represents and claims that Morrison obscures the economic causes of

this poverty. Pamela Fox similarly fears that his way of seeing the slums is destructive (110, 117). The assumption that he is entirely hostile and unsympathetic to the slum inhabitants he depicts is an oversimplification that obscures Morrison's deep sadness, conflict and despair. In particular, Morrison explicitly contradicts the idea that the poor create their own misery. Morrison maintains the intent of Dickens's already self-proclaimed realist practice, but tries to substitute an image that is grittier, more honest – more real.

Much of this critical scepticism derives from Morrison's professions about his formal methods and the assumption that formal and moral concerns are mutually exclusive. This is explicit, for example, in Matthew K. McKean's argument against the Dickensian reading of Morrison. McKean states that slum narratives did not, like Dickens, attempt to further aims of social justice, but instead 'reflected deeper racial, spatial and aesthetic attitudes of late-nineteenth-century writers whose ambitions were artistic rather than philanthropic' (28-29). Conversely, Jessica Maynard has persuasively argued that Morrison's vision combines moral concerns *and* aesthetic concerns (although her conclusions are different from my own because her argument focuses on his interest in Japanese art):

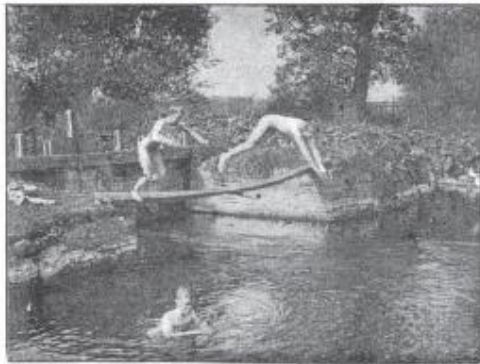
We should explore ways in which this apparently aestheticist preoccupation of Morrison's – one that might be regarded as a kind of escapist retreat in latter years, a taste distinct from his other journalistic concerns – should be viewed, in fact, as integral to his engagement with the poverty and destitution of East End life. (47)

Formal method and politics were not, for Morrison, dichotomous ideas, just as they had not been for Dickens. Émile Zola, an equally profound influence on Morrison's artistic method, also promotes the 'practical utility and high morality' (25) of the naturalistic method in his essay on his philosophy of writing, 'The Experimental Novel' (1880):

In this way we shall construct a practical sociology, and our work will be a help to the political and social sciences. I do not know, I repeat, of a more noble work, nor of a grander application. To be the master of good and evil, to regulate life, to regulate society, to solve in time all the problems of socialism, above all, to give justice a solid foundation by solving through experiment the questions of criminality – is not this being the most useful and the most moral workers in the human workshop? (26)

Zola makes explicit the theoretical affinity between certain formal and aesthetic practices and their political effects, and Morrison writes in this tradition. In fact, an aesthetic analysis of his work reveals the extent of his sympathy with the poor.

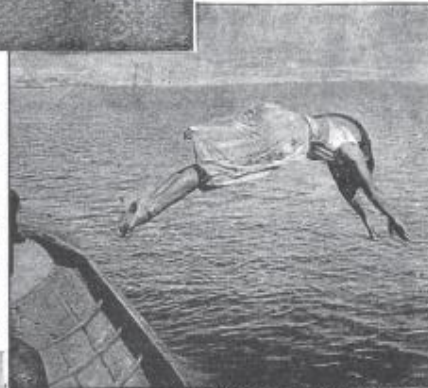
Morrison was deeply invested in the visual arts, especially painting and photography, returning to them as his primary metaphors for artistry in any discussion of his aesthetic practices. In 1892, he published a fairly technical article in *The Strand* magazine about the potential of 'Instantaneous Photographs' (compared to the older technology of daguerreotypes), so he was quite knowledgeable about developments in this field, and also the impact of technical possibilities on the content and message of photography.



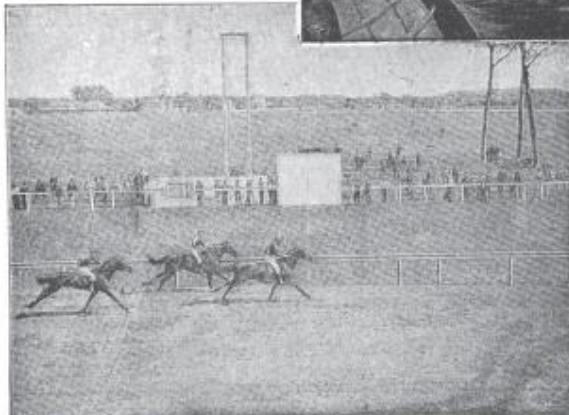
By Parry Williams. BOYS IN/ING.

Another admirable dog picture we reproduce from the album of Lieutenant Carl von Hiller, of the Austrian army. The big dog is perfectly outlined in the middle of his leap.

We reproduce a good amateur-taken picture representing boys diving and swimming. This is by Mr. Parry Williams, well known for this sort of work among old Paulines. Another of our pictures shows Miss Ward, the champion lady diver, in the middle of her



By Henry Underwood. MISS WARD, CHAMPION LADY DIVER.



By John C. Howard. FINISH OF A HORSE-RACE.

leap—taken by an American operator.

The photograph of a horse-race finish which we reproduce is the work of Mr. J. C. Hemment, of Brooklyn, New York. This gentleman holds the position of Official Photographer to the Coney Island Jockey Club, and his business is, by his plates, to check the decisions of the judges in cases of very close finishes. The eye is a most treacherous guide in such cases, more

especially when one horse, who may at the actual finish be a fraction behind the other, is travelling the faster at that moment. In such a case, of course the camera, if properly placed and used, is infallible. Nevertheless, it is not easy to understand an excited crowd waiting patiently for

Arthur Morrison. 'Instantaneous Photographs'. *The Strand Magazine* 3:18 (1892): 629-638.

The Internet Archive. Web. 30 January 2013. Public Domain.

Slum photography was not new to the 1890s, but its form was changing as technical developments, especially the flash, offered new possibilities. Years earlier, Thomas John Barnardo had also attempted to show the true characters of the slums through photographs such as 'Lost' (1870), below, but had been accused of falsifying representations of the slum through portraits of poor children that critics claimed were staged or deceptive (Koven 113).

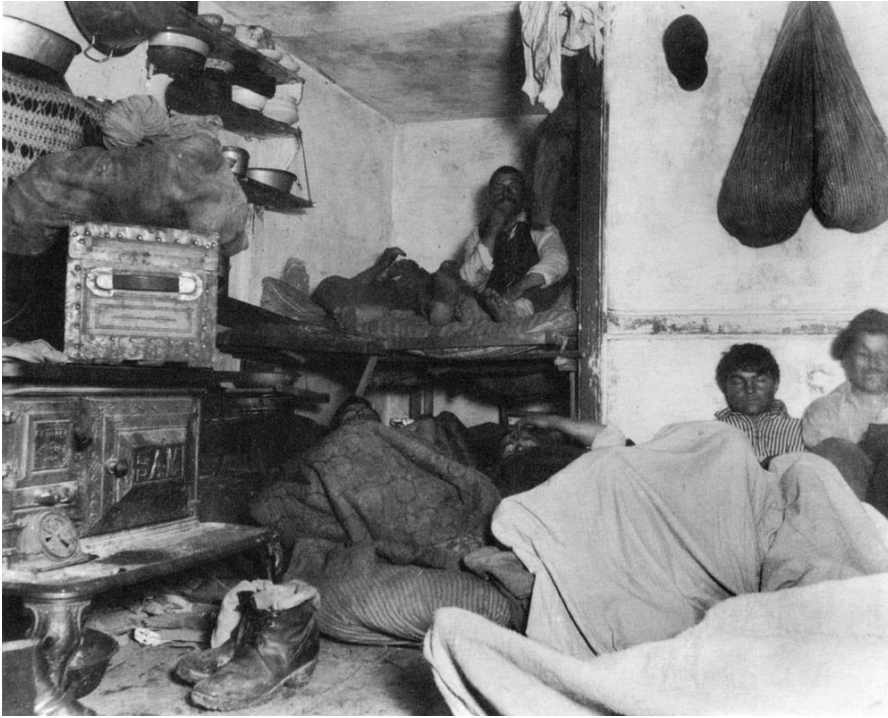


'Lost'. 1870. Barnardo's, Essex, UK.

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'Lost,' as is typical of Barnardo's photographs, is evidently staged and taken in a studio. The child has probably been costumed. These earlier slum photographs do not demonstrate the naturalism that technological improvements of the 1880s and 1890s would make possible.

However, Morrison's literary practice is strikingly different from portrait artists like Barnardo. Morrison's artistic practice in *A Child of the Jago* borrows both from Dickens's method (which in turn was inspired by Henry Mayhew) but also from the contemporary development of photojournalism. Morrison followed artists like American photographer and journalist Jacob Riis, whose gritty pictures of the slums in New York made him a famous progressive documenter and activist. Unlike the pictures taken by Barnardo and others, Riis's photographs show the very real conditions in which people are living. They are environmental shots as much as they are portraits.



Jacob Riis. 'Lodgers in Bayard Street Tenement, Five Cents a Spot', 1889.

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For instance, Riis's 'Five Cents a Spot,' 1889, is strikingly different from Barnardo's 'Lost'. Instead of a staged portrait, it is a naturalistic scene and emphasises the environment as much, or more, than it stresses the people depicted. By showing people connected to their environment, Riis emphasises that they are determined *by* that environment.

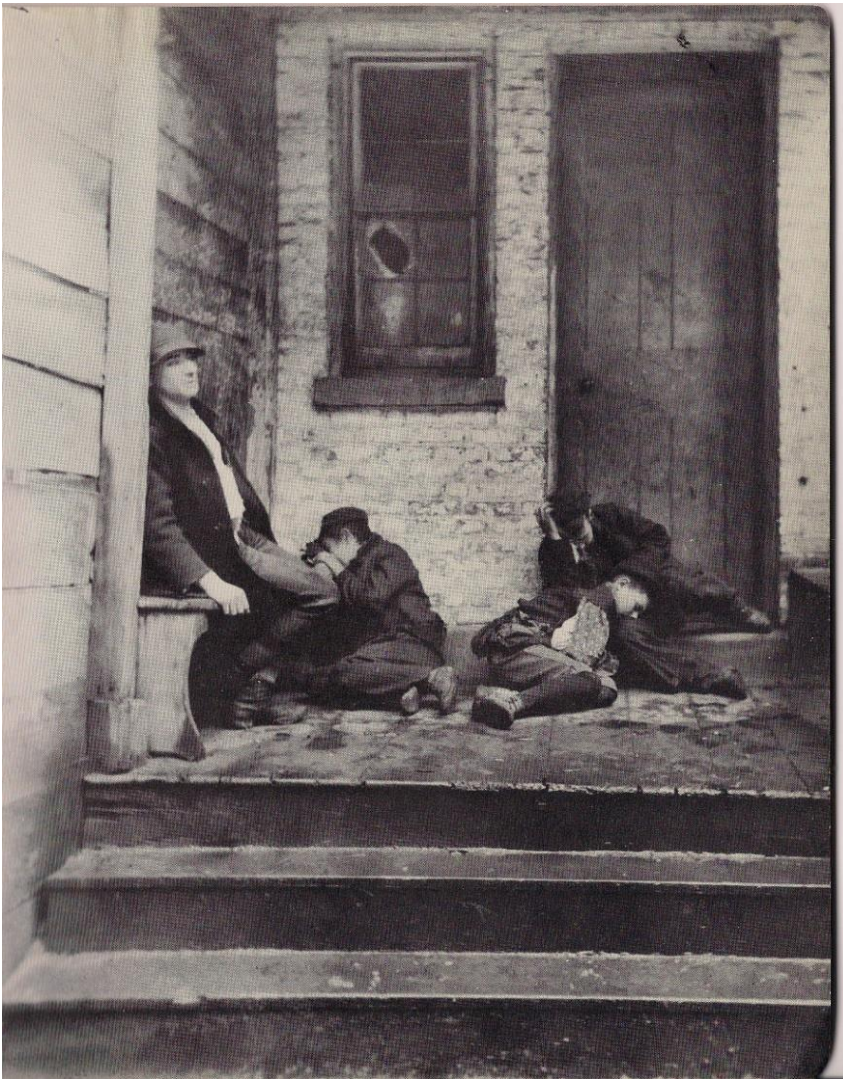
Critics from Roland Barthes to Susan Sontag to Nancy Armstrong have demonstrated that it is naïve to take on faith that photography gives us unmediated access to 'the real'. Even for the Victorians, as Daniel A. Novak has argued, photography did not represent the real so much as it did an equally fictional attempt to explore possibilities of *realism* through its own particular medium. Even though viewers understood that photographs could be manipulated, for late-Victorian writers, the image of the photograph still represents the documentary impulse – talking about photography entails talking about realism. Armstrong writes that:

Whenever Victorian fictions presumed to enlighten the reader by stripping away some euphemizing image so as to reveal the social reality beneath, that fiction was referring not to some object behind the image, but to another, somehow more adequate image. (26)

In Riis's photographs, the change in composition from the staged portrait to the environmental scene is a structural way to make the photographic image seem less mediated.

The aesthetic and compositional change from Barnardo to Riis was enabled by technological improvements in photography and, especially, the flash. Riis documented his surprising success with flash photography in an 'unsigned article' for the New York *Sun* entitled 'Flashes from the Slums/ Pictures taken in dark places by the/ Lighting Process/ Some of the Results of a Journey Through the City/ with an Instantaneous Camera – The Poor, the Idle and the Vicious'.² The very title 'Flashes

from the Slums' blends the subject matter of Riis's photographs with his technical method. Before Riis photography could be used (as Barnardo had done) to depict the poor in portraits. It was not, however, a particularly good way to document dark corners. Prior to flash photography, the darkness was not only a metaphor, but also a real artistic challenge. For instance, in this photograph entitled 'Street Arabs in Sleeping Quarters at Night' from *How the Other Half Lives* (219), the flash is necessary to portray the shadowy, nighttime scene.



Jacob Riis. 'Street Arabs in Sleeping Quarters at Night'. 1890.

© Museum of the City of New York.

<http://collections.mcny.org>.
Used by permission.

The flash, which Riis describes as surprising and sometimes frightening his subjects, even becomes part of the narrative. Riis reproduces this picture as a line drawing in 'Flashes from the Slums'; that article also includes a drawing entitled 'Waked up by the Flash Light', which dramatises the fact that Riis would often have only one chance to take a picture like the above before his subject awakened, startled:



Jacob Riis. 'Flashes from the Slums/ Pictures taken in dark places by the/ Lighting Process/ Some of the Results of a Journey Through the City/ with an Instantaneous Camera – The Poor, the Idle and the Vicious'. *The Sun*. 12 February 1888: 10.

Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, Lib of Cong. Web. 4 Feb. 2013.

Riis, the caption suggests, could not have influenced this scene. The surprise element of nighttime flash photography, and Riis's focus on it in his captioning of his own work, makes the photographer invisible to the subject until after the picture has been taken, moving Riis comfortably away from the suspect posturing of Barnardo's portraits. This erasure of the author, as Jennifer Green-Lewis argues, is one of the ways that photography makes claims to realism (5). At the same time, the flash, though a new photographic technology, echoes the bull's-eye lantern that frequently figured in Barnardo's depictions of his rescue missions two decades earlier. Critic Seth Koven writes of Barnardo that 'the bull's-eye lantern...functions both as a reminder that he usually rescued boys at night and as a metaphor for Barnardo's rescue work, which brought the 'light' of Christian teaching to the dark corners of the metropolis' (107). It also predicts the flash of the bull's-eye lantern discussed above when the policeman discovers Josh Perrott's crime. Flash, or bull's-eye lantern, is a fitting emblem for Morrison's choice to illuminate and reveal the Jago, the neighbourhood he called 'the blackest pit in London,' and 'the blackest hole in all that pit' (*Jago* 11). Darkness is not merely a moral metaphor, but also an artistic problem to be illuminated by technology.

Morrison would have been well aware of Jacob Riis. Not only did he avidly follow developments in photography, but Riis published an influential and laudatory review of *Tales from Mean Streets*, in *The Book Buyer*, just as Morrison was working on *A*

Child of the Jago. Like Morrison, Riis was deeply concerned about the conditions of the slums, and also like Morrison, he felt that an accurate representation was a first step. Riis emphasised the responsibility the middle class bears for the slums, arguing that middle-class society deserves whatever consequences (such as crime) that it suffers from the presence of the slums: 'If it shall appear that the sufferings and the sins of the 'other half,' and the evil they breed, are but as a just punishment upon the community that gave it no other choice, it will be because that is the truth' (Introduction, *How the Other Half Lives* 2). Morrison all but steals this quote from Riis for his Preface to *A Child of the Jago*:

If the community have left horrible places and horrible lives before his eyes, then the fault is the community's; and to picture these places and these lives becomes not merely his privilege, but his duty. It was my fate to encounter a place in Shoreditch, where children were born and reared in circumstances which gave them no reasonable chance of living decent lives: where they were born fore-damned to a criminal or semi-criminal career.... For the existence of this place, and for the evils it engendered, the community was, and is, responsible; so that every member of the community was, and is, responsible in his degree (5).

This quote from Morrison demonstrates two things. First, it shows the extent to which Riis influenced his sense of his own project. Second, it is a strong corrective to readings of Morrison that focus on his condemnation and disgust at the urban poor, as Morrison very clearly indicts middle-class society for the problems of the slums.

Though Riis was working in New York, not England, he considered himself to be part of the same the movement that inspired Morrison: Riis credited his success to the popularity of *In Darkest England and the Way Out* by Charles Booth (Alland 30-31). Indeed, Armstrong, discussing urban London photographers who documented crumbling tenements slated for destruction, traces their lineage back to what she calls the 'urban gothic', developed, among others, by Dickens (93). Riis counted himself amongst Morrison's admirers. In a review of *A Child of the Jago*, he gushed that Morrison's 'pen digs into the language like a subsoil plow, and brings up new treasures on every page' ('The Voice of One Crying in the Wilderness' 982). Riis cites the long history of London's slums as evidence for *A Child of the Jago's* importance to New York:

There could be no better time to rehearse it here than just now when we are taking the slum by the throat in the American metropolis. If ours is not so far gone as London's Jago it is chiefly a difference of time. It has not yet had time. If this latest argument of the man who told the 'Tales of Mean Streets,' showing us what they stood for in the life of the people, shall help us to overthrow our enemy he deserves our eternal gratitude. And how such an argument can fail to do so I cannot see. (982)

Photography and urban realist literature were mutually influential. It is not enough to say that journalist authors were trying to make their work more like the unmediated representation of photography. Photographers were also bringing the political critique of authors such as Morrison to their craft. Morrison aims for a photographic

verisimilitude in his writing, but instead of this being a naïve belief in objectivity, it is part of a larger multimedia aesthetic movement.

Morrison's Social Vision

Morrison maintains Dickens's belief that poverty is created by larger social system. He maintains Dickens's belief in the moral necessity of representing social problems. But unlike Dickens, Morrison's novels strongly imply that he does not believe in the possibility of change, making his vision bleak and filled with despair. Dickens declares that the point is to show 'in little Oliver, the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last' (Preface, 33). Morrison, on the other hand, kills Dicky in a fictional enactment of eugenics. In an interview, Morrison admitted, 'Let the weed die out, and then proceed to raise the raisable. That is why I killed Dicky Perrott. He could not escape from his environment, and had he lived, would have become perforce, as bad as his surroundings' (qtd in *Jago*, Miles 229). In fact, Morrison did end up advocating for Penal Settlements for the poor, so some of his politics were unsavoury (Keating 32). But, to say that his solutions were draconian is not to suggest that his view of the causes was simple.

Morrison called *A Child of the Jago* a story about 'a boy who, but for his environment, would have become a good citizen' (qtd in Colby 118, Fox 112). For every character that is alien to British respectability there is another who, despite desperately wishing to escape, is repeatedly dragged back down into the slum world. The protagonist Dicky is naturally the first example. I have argued that even Josh Perrott himself, who avoids preying on the weak, has a sort of muscular morality that undermines his thuggishness. The first spoken line in the novel is from Kiddo Cook, who fantasises about (and finally achieves) an escape from the criminal life: 'Ah—h—h—h... I wish I was dead: an' kep' a cawfy shop' (12). In his review of the novel, H. G. Wells wrote: 'And Mr. Morrison knocks his surgeon's case [of hereditary criminality] entirely to pieces by his own story; for he shows, firstly, in Mrs. Perrott that to come into the Jago is to assimilate oneself to the Jago; and secondly, in Kiddo Cook, that a vigorous, useful citizen may come out of it' (573). Wells recognised that the artistic vision in *A Child of the Jago* surpasses Morrison's sometimes simplistic, or even contradictory, political positions.

Furthermore, Morrison's use of naturalism demonstrates that he, like Dickens, thought that representing ugliness has moral and social benefits; that it is in itself a good. I would like to return here to the claims of recent critics mentioned before: the claims that Morrison tries to achieve an *alienation* between his middle-class readers and the slum inhabitants of his novel and that he lacks sympathy for the lower classes. These are claims that Morrison had already responded to in his preface:

A few of the objectors have caught up enough of their wits to strive after a war in my own country. They take hold of my technical method, and accuse me of lack of 'sympathy'; they claim that if I write of the Jago I should do so 'even weeping'. Now, my technical method is my own, and is deliberately designed to achieve a certain result, as is the method of every man – painter, poet, sculptor, or novelist – who is not the slave and the plaything of his material. My tale is the tale of my characters, and I have learned better than to thrust

myself and my emotions between them and my reader. The cant of the charges stares all too plainly from the face of it. It is not that these good people wish me to write 'even weeping': for how do they know whether I weep or not? No: their wish is, not that I shall weep, but that I shall weep obscenely in the public gaze. In other words, that I shall do their weeping for them, as a sort of emotional bedesman: that I shall make public parade of sympathy in their behalf, so that they may keep their own sympathy for themselves, and win comfort from the belief that they are eased of their just responsibility by vicarious snivelling. (7)

What becomes increasingly clear when looking at Morrison's bitter and resentful language in statements such as the above is that while it is true that Morrison sees an almost unbridgeable gulf between his readers and the people he depicts, it is not the slum inhabitants whom he despises. Instead, it is his readers. Morrison's aim is not to reassure his readers, but rather to make them intensely uncomfortable: 'The consciousness of duty neglected is discomfiting' (Preface 5). Additionally, the above passage makes explicit Morrison's connection between artistic method and social commentary. Morrison borrows from Dickens the idea that a more transparent art is more politically or morally justified –and that he wants to promote an unmediated experience for the reader. Unlike Dickens, however, Morrison's readers are not potential Mr. Brownlows and Rose Maylies, able and willing to lift the slum child out of his bad environment and into their moral middle-class homes. Instead, they (we?) are 'snivelling' malcontents, trying to escape the duty they bear to society, and far from wishing to ease their discomfort, Morrison's intent rather seems to be to punish them through the experience of reading.

Although Morrison's portrayal of slum inhabitants lacks the subtlety of Dickens's, he does in fact maintain Dickens's radical argument of seeing 'coercive system where it was traditional only to see bad morals' (D.A. Miller 5). Morrison's critics, both at the turn of the century and more recently, have focused on the negative portrayals of the slum inhabitants such as Sally Green, who grotesquely chews the necks of her opponents in battle. Such figures are a distraction from Morrison's real purpose, which is to highlight the difference between what Žižek would call 'subjective' and 'systemic' violence, a distinction of which Morrison is fully aware. Morrison's rage and despair is focused not on thugs such as Josh Perrott, whose subjectively violent act of murder forms the plot centre. The novel makes clear that Perrott's execution is pointless, serving neither the ends of reform nor justice. Rather, Morrison's rage and loathing is reserved for the 'community' – the perpetrators of systemic violence whose lack of attention to social problems helps to perpetuate them – in other words, his readers.

Notes

1. In the opening to *New Grub Street* (1891), George Gissing critiques this same middle-class apathy to crime and execution, when young journalist Jasper Milvain 'remarked with cheerfulness: "There's a man being hanged in London at this moment," and then, "instead of that, I am eating a really fresh egg, and very excellent buttered toast, with coffee as good as can reasonably be expected in this part of the world. – (Do try boiling

the milk, mother.)” (35). Gissing is taking a jab at the apathy of middle-class newspaper readers, and the way journalism produces emotional distance instead of empathy.

2. Alexander Alland, Sr. identifies this unsigned, third-person article as being authored by Riis himself (26).

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