

Sample Poem for Two Voices

Reading Across a Text Set for “Something Has to Change”

Photographers were hired by the Works Progress Administration through the Farm Security Administration during the 1930s to help document the Great Depression’s effect on American life. Photographer Dorothea Lange came upon a pea crop that had been ruined by freezing rain during her travels in March 1936. Lange snapped several photographs that day of a migrant worker and her children. One of those images was immediately published and became an icon of the Depression.

Ben Phelan (2014) writes of the photograph known as “Migrant Mother”: “There are few images as deeply ingrained in the national consciousness as Migrant Mother. Yet for decades, no one knew what had become of this woman and her family. No one even knew her name: Lange never asked, and by the time the photo appeared in a local newspaper, the woman and her family had moved on to the next town.”

Lange contacted the editor of the *San Francisco News*, telling him that “migrant workers were slowly starving to death in Nipomo, California. The story the *News* ran about them featured Lange’s pictures; UPI picked it up, and within days the federal government supplied the workers with twenty thousand pounds of food. By that time, however, the woman and her family, desperate to find work, had moved on” (*Smithsonian Magazine* 2002, para. 3).

This poem for two voices infers two different perspectives of a momentary meeting between photographer Dorothea Lange and migrant worker Florence Owens Thompson in the Great Depression.

Text Set Used to Create This Poem

Listed beneath each source are direct quotations, particular words and phrases, and facts used in the poem.

Dunn, Geoffrey. 2003. “Photographic License.” *New Times*. www.newtimeslo.com/archive/2003-12-03/archives/cov_stories_2002/cov_01172002.html.

Words or phrases paraphrased: seven hungry children; destitute

Lange, Dorothea. “The Assignment I’ll Never Forget: Migrant Mother.” *Popular Photography*, February 1960, 42–43.

Directly Quoted: “[She] seemed to know that my pictures might help her and so she helped me.”

Words or phrases paraphrased: living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields

Library of Congress Research Guides. n.d. “Dorothea Lange’s ‘Migrant Mother’ Photographs in the Farm Security Administration Collection.” Accessed August 9, 2021. guides.loc.gov/migrant-mother/introduction.

Phelan, Ben. 2014. “The Story of the ‘Migrant Mother.’” *Antiques Roadshow*, April 14, 2014. www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/stories/articles/2014/4/14/migrant-mother-dorothealange/.

Words or phrases paraphrased: Thompson wanted to spare her children the embarrassment

Smithsonian Magazine. 2002. “Migrant Madonna.” www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/migrant-madonna-60096830/.

Directly Quoted: “I did not ask her name or her history.”

Directly Quoted: “She said she wouldn’t sell the pictures. She said she’d send me a copy. She never did.”

Words or phrases paraphrased: a sign that said “Pea-Pickers Camp”; the woman and her family, desperate to find work, had moved on

Fact gleaned: 20,000 pounds of food

Sample Poem for Two Voices *(cont.)*

Something Has to Change

Something has to change.

I was a migrant worker struggling to feed and clothe my children

We were living off the vegetables that had frozen in the fields

She approached me to document the needs of migrant workers in a photograph

She said she wouldn't sell the pictures. She said she'd send me a copy. She never did.

I didn't want to embarrass my children

Desperate to find work, we had moved on

Something has to change.

I was a photographer hired to document the impact of the Depression on America

I drove by a sign for the pea-pickers camp

I walked through mud toward a mother surrounded by seven hungry children huddled in a tent

I took a handful of photographs of a family in poverty to tell the story

[She] seemed to know that my pictures might help her and so she helped me.

...I called my editor, sharing the news that migrant workers were slowly starving in Nipomo...

He published one of the images
The photograph created change, and twenty thousand pounds of food were delivered within days . . . food for the destitute migrant workers

I did not ask her name or her history.

*See *Reading Across a Text Set for "Something Has to Change"* for sources that inspired this work.