

**Essay 4**  
**America Seen Through Photographs Darkly**

Read Susan Sontag's essay, *America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly* and respond to the following questions.

Explain what Sontag means when she writes that Walker Evans' photos "confer importance" and "democratize" their subjects by "leveling up." In Sontag's view, how did the MOMA exhibitions, *The Family of Man* and the retrospective of Diane Arbus' differ? What differences in American culture during the 1950s and the 1970s do these exhibitions reveal?

According to Sontag, how did Diane Arbus choose her subjects? Do you think that the people who posed for Arbus's camera saw themselves in the way that the photographer saw them, or the way we do now? Compare Robert Frank's *Fourth of July - Jay, New York* (1955 - 1956) to Arbus' *Child with a Toy Hand Grenade* (1970). What is the general tone in each image and how is this tone constructed? What does a Fourth of July celebration, a public park, and children playing seem to symbolize and reveal about America to each of the photographers?

- or -

Alternately, Joe Rosenthal's image of troops raising the flag on a strategic Japanese military point became an icon of WWII and significantly gained much needed support for the war effort. Compare this image to Robert Frank's *Parade, Hoboken, New York* (1955 - 1956). In each of these images, the flag becomes a character - evaluate what the flag represents. Consider the framing of the image, what is represented, and what is omitted. How do the formal aspects of the work strengthen its message?