

## The Great Depression

### LITERATURE READING

### *The Depression Takes Its Toll*

*The Great Depression (1929–1941) was in some ways a circular problem: workers were jobless because companies would not hire them to run the machinery; companies did not hire workers to manufacture goods because there was no one to buy the goods; and no one could buy the goods because so few people had any money to spend. The relatively small percentage of people who kept their jobs lived fairly well. They were making much less money than they had before the depression, of course, but prices had also dropped, so they could buy more for their money. It was the farmers and the laid-off factory workers who suffered most. In the following selection by John C. Rogers, two young men take a trip that chronicles the poverty, the hopelessness, and the sense of human tragedy of the Great Depression, as well as the stark division between the haves and the have-nots.*

### *Beyond the Mountain*

We walk silently towards the mountain that had been scarred on the north by a quarry from whose chalk face we hear no noise, but whose even sides destroy the beautiful contours of a green hill that lies in solid shadow with white blooms of laurel showing at the wood's edge. An old woman wearing an assortment of ragged clothes stops her heavy body and smiles at a worker, who drags his feet heavily along the railroad-track path towards the woman. Like a mass of kneaded dough is the woman's face, and though she faces the sun, her pallor is like a weak blue-black shadow of a watercolor.

"You done got a job at last?" she asks the worker.

"No," he says wearily, "there ain't no jobs to be got."

"Jes a-carryin your lunch-box to keep in practice, I spose?" The woman laughs, and from her puffy face there slowly fades a smile of one who has worked too long and hard. The worker continues his aimless journey beside the rails, toward a town that has no jobs for men who helped to build it, or whose good fortune gave them life in a country of anemic slaves.

Smoke floats in a thin spiral from a large building labeled DUPONT SILK MILL, as near as we can make out from a distance. We pass another single-story building, with a shady lawn that is clean, and filled with benches under low trees that border a large fish-pond. It is a rayon-mill, but we see only about five persons in a long room that is filled with machines. There is only an empty park and a silent mill. A few workers pass us, with their lean shadows dancing before them; each a standardized product of a well-organized system of exploitation that uses enough of the mental and physical strength of a worker to make him (or her) an unconscious victim of the system he supports.

A small roadster stops beside us, and we sit on an already crowded seat with a white-collar worker and his young brother. He will be glad to take us across the mountain as far as he goes, and leave us only eight miles from our destination. I learn that the Dupont mill is not running full-time; only TEN hours a day, with a small force, and possibility of a shut-down anytime. The girls make a higher wage than the boys after they become capable robots, and may attain the munificent sum of 45¢ an hour, as compared to the boys' 20¢ and 35¢ an hour; beyond that the unorganized mountaineer cannot ascend without the sanction of the Baptist church and the House of Dupont.

"I don't believe nobody could buy a job hereabouts," says our host and tells us about a

hobo hitting his head on the tunnel, and riding into town with a fractured skull, holding his head with his hands and staring dumbly, vacantly into space until taken to the hospital where he lingers on the edge of death. “For a short-cut,” he tells us, “take the first dirt road to your right beyond the second orchard on that hill,” and he points out a thin ribbon of road that stretches far below us, where the valley goes fanwise eastward, between a range that is cut up into a lot of mountains of various

shapes and heights on the south, and bordered on the north by a solid range that terminates into a low haze of blue. “So long, good luck,” he says, leaving us at the base of a mountain with blistered feet and eight miles to go.

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**■ UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOU READ** After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions in the space provided.

1. Why do you think the old woman laughs when she sees the jobless worker wandering the rails carrying his lunchbox?

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2. What does the narrator mean when he calls the once-proud working people “anemic slaves”? What is his own view of the American economic system?

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3. What is the narrator’s attitude toward the people he sees on his way over the mountain?

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4. How does the author describe the unemployed people he sees?

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**ACTIVITY**

Imagine that you are living in America during the year 1931. Write a journal entry about your experiences looking for food and for work.

### ACTIVITY

Students should include the fact that Earhart was the first female pilot to cross the Atlantic and first pilot to cross the Pacific Ocean, that she broke her own speed records, that she was the first woman to attempt an around-the-world journey, and that her disappearance is a mystery that is still being investigated. Personal information can include where she was born, that she was a social worker, and when she began taking flying lessons.

## CHAPTER 24

### LITERATURE

1. It is absurd to her that a man who has been unemployed for so long still continues to hold out enough hope to carry his lunchbox (the symbol of his previous employment) wherever he goes.
2. The narrator seems to feel that the American economic system simply takes advantage of the people at the bottom, while the people at the top get rich.
3. The narrator feels some sorrow for them but he also seems angry, frustrated, and disgusted with them for taking part in a system that is so unfair to the American worker.
4. He describes them as ragged, pale, anemic, lean, and sickly.

### ACTIVITY

Journal entries will vary. Students should take into account what they have learned about the Great Depression from their textbook and the literature reading.

### PRIMARY SOURCE

1. He feels that humans have become cynical and self-destructive; love has developed a destructive, hurtful element.
2. They are pulled in opposing directions by selfishness and the desire for love, by new social expectations and traditional roles that conflict.
3. It suggests vulnerability and idealism; it also shows his need to find a refuge, significantly above the “epidemic of despair”

he observes in everyday life. Inspired, passionate music and the openness around him remind him of the possibilities for universal love and compassion.

4. He observes people’s many acts of cruelty toward each other and the loss of belief in goodness that results; however, he also experiences “love and pity and joy,” which restore his belief in spiritual capacities.
5. He likely believes that suffering, loss, and prolonged want have brought out the worst in people.
6. Answers will vary, but may note that loss of prosperity and hope made people doubt American ideals of justice and opportunity; prolonged want and constant failure led to cynicism and despair; people became hardened to the suffering of others.

### ACTIVITY

Responses will vary in content and format, but should suggest economic and social problems as well as spiritual and psychological scars of those who experienced the depression.

### BIOGRAPHY

1. drawing and painting; He contributed photos and drawings to the school paper regularly.
2. the use of sound in film
3. Either answer is correct, but should be supported by details from the reading.
4. Possible answer: The films provided viewers with an escape from the harsh realities of the Great Depression.

### ACTIVITY

Students’ cartoons will vary but should show the application of their individual talents and interests.

## CHAPTER 25

### LITERATURE

1. Views were influenced by such sources as newspaper cartoons that portrayed Communists as villains who met in dark, secret places; grew beards; carried torches;