

CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARD CHARITY:
THE VALUES OF DEPRESSION-ERA AMERICA
AS REFLECTED IN ITS LITERATURE

By Steven M. Stary

As a time of economic and political crisis, the Great Depression influenced authors who sought to rewrite America's underlying mythology of rugged individualism into one of cooperative or communal sensibility. Through their creative use of narrative technique, the authors examined in this thesis bring their readers into close identification with the characters and events they describe. Creating connection between middle-class readers and the destitute subjects of their works, the authors promoted personal and communal solutions to the effects of the Depression rather than the impersonal and demeaning forms of charity doled out by local governments and private charities. Meridel Le Sueur's articles "Women on the Breadlines," "Women are Hungry," and "I Was Marching," along with Tom Kromer's novel *Waiting for Nothing*, are examined for their narrative technique as well as depictions of American attitudes toward charitable giving and toward those who receive charity. The works of Le Sueur and Kromer are shown as a progression culminating in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* later in the decade. By the end of the 1930s significant progress had been made in changing American values toward communal sensibility through the work of these authors and the economic programs of the New Deal, but the shift in attitude would not be completely accomplished or enduring.

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Steven M. Stary

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 Member

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 Member

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To my wife, Dierdra, who made it possible for me to keep on writing, even though it took longer than I thought it would.

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Introduction

For a minute Rose of Sharon sat still in the whispering barn. Then she hoisted her tired body up and drew the comfort about her. She moved slowly to the corner and stood looking down at the wasted face, into the wide, frightened eyes. Then slowly she lay down beside him. He shook his head slowly from side to side. Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast. "You got to," she said. She squirmed closer and pulled his head close. "There!" she said. "There." Her hand moved gently in his hair. She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously. (618-19)

This final paragraph from John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* has been the subject of many interpretations and debates since it was first published in 1939. Rose of Sharon offers her breast, swollen with the milk her stillborn child will never need, to a starving stranger who will otherwise die. It is the last scene of what has since become the iconic text of the Great Depression, and represents the culmination of a unique vision of communal charity toward which Steinbeck builds throughout the entire novel. It is both a subtle and a sublime gesture of personal charity. The novel ends with this moment of giving on a small and personal scale rather than with the grand spectacle of a mass rally in which the oppressed rise up against injustice. The narrative of the novel seems to be leading up to some kind of ultimate climax of workers versus landowners, with Tom Joad somehow leading the vanguard of a populist surge, but the story instead turns in the final moment to focus upon an intimate gesture and selfless act of kindness from one stranger

to another. In this scene it becomes clear that Steinbeck's main focus is not just Tom Joad, but those characters such as Tom's sister, Rose of Sharon, who have learned that the small acts of kindness and charity among neighbors are the true hope for the end of the Great Depression.

Steinbeck's work in *The Grapes of Wrath* builds upon an ongoing trend in the literature of the Great Depression in which authors, reflecting the tumultuous nature of the time, reexamined and redefined the nature of the American Dream in light of the unprecedented economic forces that had so devastated so many people. They called into question the preexisting and pervasive national mythology that any hard-working person could achieve success. Steinbeck is not the first author of the 1930s to question the underlying assumptions of American society, nor even the first author to ever question those assumptions. During the Great Depression the drastic shift in the economy prompted a rethinking of political as well as artistic trends, and a greater awareness of how they reinforce one another. Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is one of the most successful and enduring novels of the era, reflecting the changes in America's attitudes toward success versus failure and individuality versus community that were brought about by the crisis of the Great Depression and the solutions of the New Deal. The exploration of those themes in Steinbeck's novel are a continuation and culmination of the work already begun earlier in the decade by authors such as Meridel Le Sueur and Tom Kromer.

Le Sueur and Kromer are relatively obscure today, but in the early 1930s they were among those authors chronicling the suffering endured by everyday people affected by the Great Depression. Meridel Le Sueur wrote articles of reportage chronicling the

lives of women in the Great Depression. Tom Kromer's autobiographical novel *Waiting for Nothing* (1935) is the story of breadlines, flophouses, and vagrant life in the worst parts of the Depression. Particularly of note in their works is the attitude toward charitable giving and the reception of charity. It is of note because they challenged prevailing attitudes toward charity, showing it for what it was supposed to be, what it had become, and what it could be going forward. Where before the Depression the story of America was that hard work was the means to success, and failure to succeed was indicative of a failure of character, writers in the 1930s challenged those assumptions and demonstrated through their writings that the down and out were victims of impersonal economic forces beyond their control, and that they were just as worthy of respect as the fortunate Americans who still had jobs during hard times.

Interest in the Great Depression has peaked lately, owing to similarities in the financial crises faced both then and now. New histories of the Depression, or new interpretations of that history, have been put forth hoping to apply modern political interpretations to the realities of the 1930s in order to serve modern political needs. Burton Folsom Jr.'s *New Deal or Raw Deal: How FDR's Economic Legacy has Damaged America* (2009) or Amity Shlaes's *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression* (2007) are two such examples. The New Deal has its admirers as well as detractors, as evidenced by Nick Taylor's *American Made: The Enduring Legacy of the WPA: When FDR Put the Nation to Work* (2008). At the same time, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (2009) by Morris Dickstein represents a renewed interest in the artistic currents of the 1930s.

Dickstein's book covers a wide range of artistic endeavors during the Great Depression, such as radio, film, theater, photography, music and literature. In Dickstein's view, the culture of the Great Depression was as rich and diverse as any era. Where earlier interpretations of 1930s culture focused on the extremes of black and white misery or escapist Technicolor extravaganza, Dickstein shows that Depression culture was neither altogether bleak nor escapist. It was, however, a time when serious societal changes were made possible because so much of the basic nature of American life was being questioned.

Among the basic beliefs of American society undergoing a change was the traditional attitude toward the giving of charity and the reception of charity. In the works of Meridel Le Sueur and Tom Kromer that are examined in this thesis, characters' attitudes toward "organized charity" are equally disdainful on either side of the poverty line. The American myth of "rugged individualism" maintains that it is up to each person to make a success or a failure of his or her own life. Charity is distasteful because both those giving and those receiving believe that there should not be a need for charity in the first place. Everyone is expected to make it on his or her own; those who cannot do so are not worthy of help, and they may even feel this way about themselves. Such attitudes lead to resentment, which only serves to widen the gap between the haves and have-nots. The rich seek to protect themselves and their property while the poor feel that they have been deprived of a fair opportunity to succeed. Therefore, those who have wealth give of it only grudgingly—if and when they do—and those who need assistance accept it just as grudgingly—when they can swallow their pride enough to ask.

At the same time, charity that begins at home, through the collective effort of family, neighbors, and even the migrant worker camps of *The Grapes of Wrath*, is not looked down upon in the works of Le Sueur and Kromer. It originates, after all, with those who know the reality of need and who do not make false assumptions about poverty. Through their writings, Le Sueur and Kromer tell the true stories of those who are in need, and enable their readers to see what they have seen. In so doing, these authors offer views of charity that call into question the very effectiveness of charity based on the false premise of rugged individualism and personal failure. Organized charity failed to provide real relief during the Great Depression because of the attitude that the poor were lazy and in need of handouts, while projects like the Works Progress Administration (WPA) succeeded by putting people to work instead of making them grovel. If they had been allowed to continue as these authors suggest, these grassroots efforts and government-sanctioned employment programs may have helped alleviate the sources of class resentment by giving back to those in most desperate need of it not only the means to support themselves but also a sense of personal worth which charity handouts cannot offer.

Le Sueur and Kromer show episodes in their works where people demonstrate genuine human kindness to each other, expecting nothing in return, brightening the otherwise bleak situations that dominate the era of the Great Depression. These authors explore the theme of charity in their works as well as the feelings of people who have to reconcile their traditional belief in American rugged individualism with the new realities of an economic depression which has left them with few options for personal survival. As the attitudes of the characters in these works change, they reflect the way in which the

authors themselves hoped to change American culture with regards to the individual in society as well as the role of charity in the everyday lives of citizens. Le Sueur and Kromer present not only negative examples of how charity is perceived and distributed by impersonal agencies, but also provide positive models of how charitable giving can occur on the smaller scale of personal human interaction. In presenting these models, the authors seek to change the attitudes of their readers and promote real societal change.

These authors experienced firsthand the worst of the Great Depression, and worked to change their readers' perceptions of the real human beings affected by it. The writing style employed by each author reflects his or her approach to charity, individualism, and collectivism. Meridel Le Sueur's articles tell the stories of women who are overlooked, ignored, or victimized by prevailing attitudes toward personal failure. Tom Kromer writes about his life as a "stiff" or bum during the early years of the Depression. Through their own personal experiences Le Sueur and Kromer want their readers to see that charity is something best understood and rendered on the scale of individuals working together as community, not on the large and impersonal scale of government bureaucracies and market forces. In their writings they manipulate narrative techniques, such as point-of-view, in order to bring the reader into closer identification with their characters and situations, making the reader a part of the collective that can effectively make charity work without being degrading. Ideally, therefore, readers would become part of the solution instead of outside observers of the problem. Rather than perpetuating the myth of rugged individualism, these authors actively rewrote the national mythology from one of "every man for himself" to one of collective

responsibility for the well-being of his or her neighbors, or what Meridel Le Sueur called “communal sensibility.”

The Depression represented a unique opportunity for authors like Le Sueur, Kromer, Steinbeck and others to alter the American narrative. Prior to the Depression, the prevailing attitudes toward work and success could be summed up with the phrases “the Puritan work ethic” and “rugged individualism.” The first of these phrases (also called the “Protestant work ethic”) has long had an influence on the national character, dating back to the earliest colonists in Massachusetts. The Puritans looked for signs of their personal salvation, and one measure of God’s favor was a successful life on earth. In other words, material and social success was indicative of being among the elect. The idea of material and social success being seen as a measure of divine favor may not seem like one today’s more secular society would recognize, but the kernel of the idea survives; then as now we value hard work as a means to get ahead.

The Puritan sentiment continued to shape American values of later generations, as shown by the works of Benjamin Franklin, who taught the value of thrift and hard work through the aphorisms of *Poor Richard’s Almanac*. He praises industrious character with phrases like these: “At the working man’s house hunger looks in but dares not enter,” or “Plough deep while sluggards sleep and you shall have corn to sell and to keep.” In *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America*, Scott Sandage relates that “Everybody knew those smug couplets about pennies saved and earned, and self-righteous chirping always disturbed the calm after a financial storm. Franklinesque proverbs blamed failure on laziness, drunkenness, greed, ignorance, extravagance, and a host of other sins” (15). It would be no different at the start of the Great Depression.

In 1841 the Transcendentalist author Ralph Waldo Emerson would echo Franklin and the Puritan work ethic in “Self-Reliance.” Once again, the advice is to work with your own God-given talents or else nothing good can come to you. Early in that essay in which Emerson speaks of the virtues an individual should possess he states: “Though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till.” Implied in this is the idea that you cannot rely on the work of others, only yourself.

Sandage cites Emerson’s good friend and fellow Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau as an example of just the opposite mindset. Thoreau resisted the hustle and the bustle of “modern life” in the 1840s and 1850s. He worked only enough to survive, often relying on the generosity of family and friends. His famous experiment in minimalist living at Walden Pond was one of reducing life to its simplest terms as a reaction against how complicated life and the pursuit of success had become for his fellow Americans. Although he is now widely read as a true American genius, original thinker, and counterculture rebel (before there was even a counterculture,) he was seen as a failure in his own time for his lack of ambition to do more with his short life.

Thoreau represents an opposing mythology within the dominant American narrative of individual success. He represents the undercurrent of failure: both inadvertent and deliberate failure to conform to the “hard work leads to success” school of thought. Apart from not paying his poll tax in order to protest the Mexican War, his worst offense was nonconformity to the spirit of his age that dictated that a man was worthy only if he accomplished something. Sandage argues that Thoreau was “Neither a deadbeat nor a drunkard, he was the worst kind of failure: a dreamer” (1). American society had become

driven by the pursuit of wealth to such a degree that Thoreau's nature resisted. "If a man could fail simply by not succeeding or not striving, then ambition was not an opportunity but an obligation" (Sandage 2). As such, he was judged to be a failure merely because of his lack of greater success. Thoreau himself said it best in the concluding chapter of his 1854 book *Walden* when he questioned the priorities of society and endorsed the legitimate value of nonconformist, alternative goals: "Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer" (345).

Through authors like Franklin, Emerson, and many others survives the same basic mentality: the only way to get ahead and be successful is through your own hard work. The dark side of that attitude is also present as a constant undercurrent in American thought. If someone is not successful, it must be through lack of character, ambition, and hard work. The individual is responsible for his own success, and is also responsible for his own failure. From this premise it is easy to see how failure was seen as more than just bad luck, it was interpreted as a failure of character. Hard economic times did not matter. "Such ideologies fixed blame squarely on individual faults, not extenuating circumstances," Sandage explains (17). In that society, a man who needs charity is to be looked down on for his lack of success, and he may even feel like he deserves the scorn of his more successful brethren.

In his book *Balancing Acts: American Thought and Culture in the 1930s* Terry Cooney states the sentiment of the times, summing up the long-held tenets of Adam Smith and free-market capitalism:

A system of unrestricted capitalism was inherently just because people got what they deserved: the rich had presumably earned their favored place, while the poor were responsible for their own fate through deficiencies of ability and effort. On such premises, it was easy to confuse the existing social hierarchy with a moral one. (41)

By the 1930s, as with Benjamin Franklin's generation, morality based on religion had been replaced by morality based on free-market capitalism.

At the end of the nineteenth century and into the beginning decades of the twentieth this moral outlook had evolved into one often described as "Social Darwinism." This outlook applied the concepts of "survival of the fittest" to nations, corporations, and individuals alike. Those best adapted to conditions were the ones that survived and prospered, and therefore deserved to do so, while those who declined, failed, or died were obviously unfit in some way. It was a Social Darwinist, William Graham Sumner, who first used the term "forgotten man" in 1883 to describe "the little guy who plodded along, never complaining or asking for help, while reformers handed out free meal tickets to lazy scum" (Sandage 6). This forgotten man is one who achieves some success, even if on a small scale, but is forgotten due to society's focus on the other ends of the socioeconomic spectrum: on the very successful and on the very destitute. The "forgotten man" would be invoked again by President Roosevelt during the Great Depression, but in a much different context.

The phrase "rugged individualism" comes from President Herbert Hoover, but is clearly an extension of that same work ethic that drove previous generations of Americans. He used the phrase several times to describe that aspect of the American

spirit which he believed would allow the country to overcome the Depression. Hoover was ahead of his own advisors and even the later presidential candidate Franklin Roosevelt in seeing the Depression as a psychological as well as an economic emergency. William Manchester states in his history *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America 1932-1972* that President Hoover tried to get ahead of the crisis by renaming it: "He himself had chosen the word 'Depression' because it sounded less frightening than 'panic' or 'crisis'" (26). Not only did Hoover try to downplay the magnitude of the crisis, he maintained his belief that the same spirit that had made America great would lead it out of the Depression.

That spirit, of course, is the same Puritan work ethic from the past, expressed in his phrase "rugged individualism." At first glance, the phrase implies that Americans are bold and adventuresome, with a feeling of individual accomplishment and personal responsibility. The invocation of "rugged individualism" in this crisis also served to shift the responsibility for individual failures away from the government and back onto the individuals. In effect, Hoover tried to sell the American public on the idea that it was up to them to get themselves out of their hard times. How such an American who has already failed is supposed to recover himself in the midst of the Depression without any governmental efforts at reform is not readily apparent.

In 1930, when the International Apple Shippers Association came up with a scheme to give surplus apples to the unemployed to sell on credit, there were suddenly apple sellers all over. President Hoover was so out of touch with the realities of the economic situation he even remarked that "Many people have left their jobs for the more profitable one of selling apples" (Manchester 26). He saw it as a sign of recovery, and not

of the scale of the desperation being experienced by the jobless. To him, it was the kind of enterprise that was entirely in character for the average hard-working American. In “Hoover’s Response to the Great Depression,” Stephen Goode interprets Hoover’s actions as a result of the best intentions: “Hoover genuinely believed that he was doing all that he morally could do to relieve the Depression. He could have opened government coffers and handed out cash to the needy. But that would have been turning his back on American traditions of self-reliance and individualism” (130). Hoover overlooked the alternative of reinterpreting the American tradition to include more direct government intervention, as Franklin Roosevelt would eventually do.

Hoover used the phrase rugged individualism to include not only the efforts of individual Americans lifting themselves up by their bootstraps or helping others in overcoming adversity, but also the efforts of local charities instead of government intervention. This method had always worked in the past, but the magnitude of the Depression overwhelmed charities. Traditional charities were unable to cope with the scale of the crisis:

The Depression, while multiplying the demands upon charities, had dried up their sources of contributions. By 1932, private help had dwindled to 6 percent of the money spent upon the needy, leaving some thirty million people to public welfare. Unfortunately, local governments couldn’t handle the burden. State and city budgets had been in the red since 1930.

(Manchester 38)

Rugged individualism for Hoover applied not just to individual people, but to individual communities. It was not the role of the federal government to handle relief, but it was

entirely appropriate for local governments or private charities to do so. Hubert Humphrey, comparing the philosophies of the Hoover and Roosevelt administrations in his book *The Political Philosophy of the New Deal*, notes that “Laissez faire government had no place within its theory for public expenditure for unemployment relief. The Hoover administration had stated repeatedly that the ‘dole’ was un-American and demoralizing” (46). Hoover may not have been as much concerned that large-scale government handouts were demeaning to individual recipients as he was that it was not the job of the federal government. Instead he argued from his traditional stance that government should do as little as possible when regulating the economy. In Hoover’s opinion, “‘American ideals and American institutions’ had to be preserved, [and] drought, hunger, and suffering could be addressed only in ‘the spirit of charity and mutual self-help through voluntary giving and the responsibility of local government,’ not through national action” (Cooney 42). At least Hoover believed someone (local government and private charity) would be there to help out. In contrast, his Secretary of the Treasury, Andrew Mellon, was more in keeping with the Social Darwinist approach: “Liquidate labor, liquidate stocks, liquidate the farmers, liquidate real estate” (Manchester 25). One can only imagine the chaos and misery of the American people if “liquidation” of the unfit had become the national policy.

With the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt to the presidency in 1932, the national policy took a radically different direction. Under a series of programs that came to be called the “New Deal,” Roosevelt pushed through Congress more bills in his first hundred days in office than any president before him. Unlike Hoover, the Roosevelt

administration was willing to bring all the powers of the executive branch to bear on the problem. Roosevelt's philosophy of government was much different from Hoover's:

I assert that modern society, acting through government, owes the definite obligation to prevent the starvation or the dire want of any of its fellow men and women who try to maintain themselves but cannot. . . . To these unfortunate citizens aid must be extended by Government, not as a matter of charity, but as a matter of social duty. (Humphrey 46)

During the New Deal, the reach of the federal government would extend into every area of American society in an attempt to alleviate the worst effects of the Great Depression.

Instead of Hoover's hands-off approach, hoping that the markets would recover on their own, Franklin Roosevelt tried radical experimentation. He said, "Take a method and try it. If it fails, try another. But above all, try something" (Manchester 80). Because of these radical efforts the New Deal was accused of any number of political heresies, from fascism to communism, but in the end it was none of these. Though influenced by both the right and the left, and accused of being too far to the right or the left by those on the other side, the New Deal programs were overall an attempt by the federal government to fix that which had before been unregulated in hopes of mitigating the dire consequences of the Great Depression. To conservatives, the New Deal went too far. To socialists and communists, it did not go far enough toward transforming American society. In economic terms, the perspective of later years indicates that deficit spending was the right thing to do, but it would not be until the Second World War that the United States finally spent its way out of the Great Depression.

Although its programs had mixed success, and are still debated by historians, economists, and politicians to this day, the New Deal did permanently change the relationship of government to the people and of people to the government. The massive scale of the Depression and the reworking of the federal bureaucracy in the New Deal created a new relationship between the average citizen and the government, as well as a dramatically altered view of personal success and failure.

The New Deal redefined the relationship between the national government and the citizens it represented. According to New Deal historian William Leuchtenburg:

If you had walked into an American town in 1932, you would have had a hard time detecting any sign of a federal presence, save perhaps for the post office and even many of today's post offices date from the 1930s.

Washington rarely affected people's lives directly. There was no national old-age pension system, no federal unemployment compensation, no aid to dependent children, no federal housing, no regulation of the stock market, no withholding tax, no federal school lunch, no farm subsidy, no national minimum wage law, no welfare state. (qtd. in Cooney 34-35)

Instead of a distant and uninvolved entity unconcerned with the ordinary lives of the average American, the United States government under Roosevelt seemed to permeate every aspect of those lives. Where Hoover's administration came off as cold and uncaring, Roosevelt warmed the populace through his "fireside chats." In talking to the people as a fellow American instead of as an aloof patrician, Roosevelt brought people together and made them see how the problems of the Depression were a collective

problem that could be solved only if everyone did their part. This reassurance may have done nothing in hard, economic terms, but it did turn around the American psyche.

By the end of the decade, through many ups and downs, successes and failures of the New Deal, collective effort would no longer be unusual but a new way of life for Americans. Roosevelt signaled this change from individual to collective consciousness in his first inaugural address when he said: “If I read the temper of our people correctly, we now realize as we never have realized before our interdependence on each other; that we can not merely take, but we must give as well” (48). It is this shift from the attitude of “every man for himself” to “we can do it together” that made the Depression more bearable and even laid the foundation for the massive wartime effort that would be necessary when the United States entered the Second World War.

The New Deal did much more than experiment with government policies and economies. The experiments were bold in scale and radical in approach. The massive effort worked not just on the level of the national government, but on the small scale of the individual American. The New Deal tried to work within the existing mentality of Americans, including their sense of rugged individualism and all that it implied. The challenge was to change the perceptions of Americans, to see those who were unemployed and fallen on hard times not as “others” who were lazy, but as victims of larger market forces affecting the whole nation. Roosevelt invoked the term “the forgotten man” to refer to these Americans, rebranding the term from its original meaning: “For FDR, the forgotten man was the nice guy who finished last, a capable citizen facing oblivion without bold government reform” (Sandage 6). Roosevelt’s usage of the “forgotten man” became the new definition for the downtrodden victims of the

Depression. Instead of seeing the destitute as failures, they were recast as hard-working Americans down on their luck through no fault of their own. These new forgotten men were even celebrated in the song “Remember My Forgotten Man” from the hit film *Gold Diggers of 1933*.

On a nationwide and impersonal scale, it was easy for the majority of Americans who did remain employed to look on the unemployed as bums, hobos, and drifters. It is easy to forget that while talking about near 27% unemployment rates that the majority of Americans (the other 73%) remained employed and would naturally try to stay that way, protecting their own interests in difficult times. Changing the minds of the majority would be an ongoing effort, reflected in and shaped by the popular culture of the decade.

Seen as a mass, the unemployed were a dangerous and desperate mob capable of overthrowing the existing social order. When looked at individually, the bum was a fellow American fallen on hard times. It was not that they were any less hard-working, but that there was no work to be had. When New Deal programs like the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) put the unemployed to work and allowed them to earn a living instead of a handout, attitudes began to change. According to Cooney:

Social workers—and the large majority of relief recipients, according to one poll—strongly preferred work relief over direct relief (money given without the expectation of work) because it presumably avoided the humiliation of accepting charity and allowed the worker to maintain a sense of dignity, ability, and self-worth. (49)

This fit well with the existing American work ethic, and that of WPA administrator Harry Hopkins. “Hopkins in particular felt that relief without jobs would destroy individual pride” Manchester notes. “He liked to hear women say, ‘We’re not on relief any more. My husband works for the government’” (86). The New Deal was starting to put a dent in unemployment, but even more than that, it was restoring hope and pride.

Work programs operated on a nationwide scale, but attitudes changed on the personal scale. In one effort to change those attitudes, the Farm Security Administration sent out photographers, among them Dorothea Lange, to provide the visual proof of what was really happening in America. Her photographs showed how the Depression and New Deal were being played out on the faces of real people. Lange’s photograph *Migrant Mother* became the icon of the Depression years. Lange showed the resilience of a hard-working American mother struggling through hard times, worthy of respect and help.

The photographs of Lange and others are just one aspect of America’s changing attitudes toward poverty and charity during the Depression. Authors such as Meridel Le Sueur, Tom Kromer, and John Steinbeck worked to change those attitudes through their writings, both fiction and nonfiction. Through their works and those of other contemporary writers, the image of the poor was changed to one more in keeping with the hard-working traditions Americans wanted to believe in:

If the destitute were citizens of the kind who had built America—if they were of independent agrarian stock, people committed to family and work, people of dignity and solid character—then the fault for their condition could not be theirs, and a society true to itself surely needed to respond.
(Cooney 187)

Just as in Lange's photographs, it was the words of reporters and writers that put the stories of the Depression in front of the public. From the depths of the Depression came writers like Meridel Le Sueur and Tom Kromer, who put the Depression in individual terms even before the New Deal had come along. Later, John Steinbeck would continue to tell the stories of those affected by the Depression and the Dust Bowl, but he would include how the New Deal was working to change conditions.

The brilliance of these authors was to recast their characters not as failures but as the same rugged individuals as any other American, though fallen on hard times due to the larger economic collapse that was beyond their own control. Despite hard times, individuals like Le Sueur's single women, Kromer's "stiffs," or families like Steinbeck's Joads held on through the hardships. "The theme of endurance offered assurances that the nation would remain intact because Americans were a people who could 'take it' and persevere" (Cooney 187). By telling the individual stories of such characters, real and fictitious, they become personal to the reader; they become fellow Americans and not some Others to be ignored or scorned.

The genre of reportage and the articles of Meridel Le Sueur are the first works to be analyzed. Based on eyewitness journalism, but without the emotional detachment of most traditional journalists, reportage is the entry point to a more literary understanding of the Depression. Reportage allows the author to become involved in the events on which she reports, telling the important parts of the story that mere facts do not tell, such as the emotions and attitudes of those involved. In Le Sueur's writings of the time she tries to connect on a personal level with her subjects, and through her narrative technique she helps her readers see the subjects as real human beings too.

Le Sueur is not an outside observer but a participant in the events she describes. In the article “I Was Marching” she begins with an individual perspective, but by the end of the piece she speaks as part of the group. In part of the article “Women are Hungry” she writes in second person about a schoolteacher trying to prove she is destitute in order to receive charity. By addressing the reader directly and making “you” part of the story, Le Sueur breaks down the barriers between author, subject, and reader, drawing the reader into the story to experience the emotional impact with her. Le Sueur’s articles from the 1930s, particularly “Women on the Breadlines,” “Women are Hungry,” and “I Was Marching,” show aspects of the Great Depression that are often overlooked in most history books: the role of women as well as the collective action taken by desperate people in the heartland of the country. In these articles, real charity is found more in the cooperative efforts of ordinary people helping each other to survive starvation and strikes than it is in the breadlines that have become a ubiquitous feature of the Depression experience. When Le Sueur connects herself and her readers to the women in need, she illustrates the human element in the collective effort of charity, as opposed to the dehumanizing bureaucracy.

Tom Kromer depicts another variety of charity during the Great Depression, that of the mission breadline and flophouse. Charities like the missions felt that they must help the poor and hungry, but they also required a unique form of payment in return: the real or feigned salvation of a soul. Based on real-life experiences of the author, but written from the perspective of an ordinary “stiff,” Kromer’s *Waiting for Nothing* takes another step away from strict adherence to the facts in order to tell a more important story. The emotional truth of Kromer’s story is more compelling and evocative than just

the bare facts would tell. Kromer himself is an educated man, but writes in the style of a bum or “stiff” in order to create an authentic first-person narrator. The implication is that fiction can tell more of the truth than journalism or biography can. The episodes depicted in Kromer’s novel show rugged individualism through the eyes of someone trying to survive on his own against the cruel realities of life in the Depression. His use of the first-person narrator makes the story personal in an attempt to create a connection with the reader, while the incidents he writes about demonstrate his isolation from his fellow human beings. He, like Le Sueur, tries to connect to others, but his experience of charity is mostly that of exploitation and degradation. Charities such as the soup kitchen and flop house run by a mission are not a sincere attempt to help the destitute but an opportunity to take advantage of desperation in order to win converts. Seemingly generous propositions often turn out to be just another form of exploitation. This is especially true, I will argue, in the case of the homosexual “Mrs. Carter,” who offers the narrator food and shelter in return for sexual favors.

Many characters in Kromer’s story are the worst kind of rugged individuals looking out for themselves, and apparent charity is really only a means to getting what they want for themselves. However, Kromer’s bleak narrative contains episodes in which stiffs do watch out for each other, share means of survival, or connect emotionally without exploitation. One such instance is when Kromer is able to share his expertise at being “on the stem” with the less experienced Yvonne, who has turned to prostitution in order to survive. Episodes like this are few in the story, but their presence suggests that there is hope for human contact and understanding even in the worst of times. Kromer shows the good side of personal charity, and the bad side of large-scale, organized

charity. In doing so, he demonstrates to the reader that those giving charity with strings attached can be worse than those who have to lie or have turned to a life of crime because of their need.

The depictions of charity in the works of Le Sueur and Kromer demonstrate that some charities were out to save souls, some were government agencies operating according to their own set of commandments, and some were private individuals who felt that they must “do something” to alleviate the suffering of their fellow man. Each had their drawbacks when the charity was given with a price. Meanwhile, those on the receiving end of this assistance would rather have worked an honest job and provided for themselves than have taken a handout which demeaned them either by labeling them as failures or by demanding something in return for the charity.

The work of authors like Le Sueur, Kromer, and later Steinbeck to alter public perceptions of charity had borne fruit by the end of the decade, in conjunction with the change of attitude engineered by the programs of the New Deal. Looking at the works of Meridel Le Sueur and Tom Kromer from the Depression’s early years, and contrasting them with John Steinbeck’s work later in the decade, the shift in American attitudes toward charity becomes more apparent. Unlike the works of Le Sueur and Kromer, written from the lowest point of the Depression, Steinbeck’s work shows that times were getting better, and that a more collective effort would be the way American culture could adapt to survive in the future. The stories of Le Sueur, Kromer, and finally Steinbeck set up ideal charitable models for the reader to see and emulate. The communal sensibility achieved by Le Sueur in “I Was Marching,” the caring of Kromer’s reformed prostitute

Yvonne, and the final gift of Steinbeck's Rose of Sharon all illustrate what charity can and should be.

Meridel Le Sueur's Reportage

Meridel Le Sueur describes her feelings on the 1934 Teamster's Strike in Minneapolis in this excerpt from her journals:

It's a kind of hoax to write about it looking AT it. I must be a part of it. That's the devil about being a writer in America. Reporting is objective observing, and writing is subjective and each is only half—without being a part so you become a special creature of a sort, neither fish nor fowl nor good red herring. So special and LOOKING ON. I am determined to get IN, to have an experience with it, in it and not just look at it. I am determined. (qtd. in Coiner *Better Red* 103)

She reported on the strike in her article "I Was Marching," originally published in *New Masses* in September 1934, but the journal reveals more of the emotions and thought processes of the author while the events were happening. Throughout her writings from the Depression era and beyond, Le Sueur's works reveal an ongoing effort to transition from individual sensibility to collective or what she called "communal sensibility." The articles examined in this section show Le Sueur's take on that communal sensibility as the way to survive in the Depression and ultimately to transform American society. Rather than depending upon organized charities or government intervention, Le Sueur promotes individuals joining together to take collective action in helping to improve conditions. The real people she describes in her articles help each other to survive, despite an indifferent government and impersonal market forces. Le Sueur's writings show a progression toward communal sensibility indicative of the changing attitudes

many Americans were experiencing with regard to the unprecedented poverty created by the Great Depression.

Le Sueur employs creative techniques such as shifting the narrative point-of-view (first-person, second-person and third-person, as well as singular and plural forms of the same) in order to draw the reader into the experiences she describes. In doing so, she seeks to involve the reader as she herself became involved. Through her involvement in causes like the Teamster's Strike, Le Sueur achieved the communal sensibility she sought for herself and which she believed would be the end result of the enormous changes in taking place in society during the 1930s. Le Sueur's articles are part of that change as she shows the real stories of real women affected by hard times. They and she change over time from being strangers and outsiders to becoming part of a mass movement for social change. The articles show a progression in Le Sueur's own sense of community and involvement over the early years of the Depression. As she writes the stories of other women and herself she helps to transform the national mythology from one of rugged individualism to one of cooperative strength and mutual aid.

The women in these articles make progress toward Le Sueur's communal sensibility through their participation in the events of the Depression and in causes that aimed for change. The women from 1932's "Women on the Breadlines," for example, are embarrassed or afraid to look at each other in the employment bureau. Le Sueur shows them to be strangers to each other, unable to connect even though they share the same experiences. It is so early in the Depression that the last vestige of their old morality still makes them ashamed to need help at all. In 1934's "Women Are Hungry" the women have reached their low point, many looking out only for themselves as lone wolves,

though many others manage to share what little they have with one another. Le Sueur's technique evolves in this article, manipulating narrative modes to bring the reader into the story. At one point, she employs second-person narration to immerse the reader into the life of one particularly tragic woman. Finally, in "I Was Marching," Le Sueur shows how many individuals can come together as one to achieve a greater purpose, as she experienced during the events of the Teamster's Strike. It is the final step in her own evolution toward achieving communal sensibility, and through her writings Le Sueur is able to convey the same sense to the reader. In *Three Radical Women Writers: Class and Gender in Meridel Le Sueur, Tillie Olsen, and Josephine Herbst*, Nora Ruth Roberts contends that while Le Sueur is "Struggling vainly to get out of her intellectuality, she ends by immersing her prose in the act of joining the demonstration as a living, breathing organic body" (45). The strikers take care of each other, as Le Sueur discovers once the final boundaries of her individuality are breached by the fantastic events she experiences with the crowd. It is a transcendent moment she shares not only with the crowd of strikers but also with her readers in hopes that the same spirit will lead them to embrace a collective effort to end the worst miseries of the Depression.

These articles are not fiction, but rather they are reportage. As pioneered by writers like Joseph North, Josephine Herbst, and Meridel Le Sueur in the pages of the Communist Party USA's publication *New Masses*, reportage is a kind of journalism in which the lines between objective reporting and subjective experiences become blurred if not altogether erased. The writer is immersed in the experience, not just observing it, and tries to get the reader to experience events as well. Joseph North explains the genre in "Reportage," an article written for the American Writer's Congress in 1935:

It not only answers the questions who, why, when, where. That is far from enough. The writer of reportage must answer those questions . . . plus.

That plus makes the difference. He must do more than tell his reader what has happened—he must help the reader experience the event. . . . The finest writers of reportage are artists in the fullest sense of the term. They do their editorializing through their imagery. (120-21)

According to Constance Coiner in *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur*, “Reportage attempted to detail Depression conditions from the perspective of those most acutely suffering them—the hungry, unemployed, and homeless. Reportage intended to make the reader ‘*experience*’ the event recorded” (27-28). Reportage followed in the tradition of muckraking journalism from earlier in the century, but in the 1930s it was encouraged by the Communist Party as part of the genre of proletarian realism. As Paula Rabinowitz states in “Writing Red: Women’s Short Fiction of the 1930s,” “The form most suitable to articulating a proletarian revolutionary culture was reportage. Capturing the immediacy of struggle and the consciousness of commitment for the reader, that curious form of engaged journalism best represented the aims of the movement” (19).

Meridel Le Sueur was born and raised in the Midwest, in a family long associated with progressive and socialist causes. In 1924 Le Sueur joined the Communist Party USA, and much of her writing through the rest of the 1920s and into the 1930s was first published through the Party and its journals such as *New Masses*. She remained committed to the Party throughout her life, though this caused her to experience the worst of the anti-communist backlash of the McCarthy era. It is for this reason that her writings

from the Depression were mostly forgotten for decades. In more recent years there has been a revival of interest in Le Sueur, mainly as a feminist writer. Most of the scholarship on Le Sueur's writings focuses either on her feminism or her involvement in the Communist Party USA. Her articles from the Depression, for instance, show the perspective of women in need, women participating in demonstrations and strikes, and the ways women were forced to cope with the effects of the times. These are insights into aspects commonly overlooked in the writings of the time. It would be a mistake to pigeonhole Le Sueur into a single category when she wrote so well across genres and causes. Though suppressed because of anti-communist sentiment by one generation and revived by another as part of a new wave of feminism, Le Sueur stayed her own course. During the Great Depression Le Sueur wrote of what life was like for women and for Midwesterners, demographics often downplayed both then and now in studies of the 1930s. She provides valuable insight into how many of these overlooked Americans coped with the attitudes and institutions that were supposed to help them.

At times her writing was criticized by other members of the Party for deviating from what they saw as the main focus, that of workers. Women's issues were not seen as a priority; they would be dealt with after the more important class struggle was won. In Charlotte Nekola's article "Worlds Unseen: Political Women Journalists and the 1930s" she points out that "*New Masses* seldom featured articles whose main focus was the status of women, unless the analysis of the article eventually led to the Party's position on the primacy of class struggle" (191). Many feminist critics today, such as Constance Coiner, Elaine Hedges, and Paula Rabinowitz, see the feminist aspects of Le Sueur's works in opposition to Communist Party doctrine (Roberts 37). This interpretation seeks

to place Le Sueur in a category to which she does not properly belong. Roberts asserts that “Le Sueur herself did not make the binary opposition between feminist and proletarian. [. . .] Le Sueur writes of both as the ‘oppressed,’ the ‘under classes’” (37). It is tempting to portray her as a rebel even amongst other rebels, but Le Sueur maintained her belief that her communal sensibility would be achieved by the Communist Party, despite the criticism she sometimes received within it.

According to Paula Rabinowitz in *Labor and Desire: Women’s Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America*, in response to “Women on the Breadlines,” Le Sueur’s first article for *New Masses*, “She was criticized for her ‘defeatism’ by the editors, who were annoyed that such women were not joining the organizations of the working class, and that this writer was not striking a more hopeful note” (2). Despite such criticism, Le Sueur continued to write articles about the plight of women, and maintained her belief that communal sensibility was to be the right and inevitable result of class struggle. “I Was Marching” is the culmination of this struggle for Le Sueur and her readers, combining her emphasis on the needs of women with her emphasis on the working class, and even showing how her ideal of collective action by women can synchronize with that of the labor organizations that were the focus of the Party.

Le Sueur responded to those critics, such as Horace Gregory, who questioned her style and her involvement in an article called “The Fetish of Being Outside,” published in *New Masses* in 1935. Gregory had insisted that as a writer one had to maintain detachment from events, while for Le Sueur it was involvement and participation in the events she reported on that formed the essence of both the style and the substance of her works. Where writers like Gregory might cite a kind of artistic integrity in order to

remain aloof from the real struggles of the time presumably in order to better write about them from a comfortable distance, Le Sueur insisted on the need to be an active participant. She defends her narrative approach and her focus of communal struggle this way: “You cannot be both on the barricades and objective or removed at the same time. I suppose you can but you are likely to receive the bullets of both sides” (300-301). It is not just the actual events that Le Sueur believes a writer must become involved in, but the entire cause. Being an individual and part of the mass movement at the same time is not only possible, but desirable. The writer or activist can be an agent for change as one individual to another, or as a part of the masses working collectively. Michael Szalay writes of Le Sueur’s approach in *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State*. “[She] insists that the writer must be unambiguously a part of it, completely and totally embedded both in the reality of the times and in political responses to it” (230). She must be not only a part of the times, but one of the reasons for the times to become what they are.

For Le Sueur, communal sensibility was not necessarily achieved through the effort of the government, whether federal, state, or local. Nor did it come through organized charities such as the YWCA. Because women were mainly ignored or treated as less important by the bureaucracies of governments and charities, they suffered silently and invisibly as far as mainstream press coverage was concerned. Le Sueur’s articles helped to publicize the plight of this ignored population. Through the use of reportage, Le Sueur brought her readers into the experiences of the women she wrote about, and she herself was one of those women. As such, she was able to report from within each event or experience. In her writing Le Sueur employs the techniques of reportage to bring about

the communal sensibility between herself, her subjects, and her readers. In the words of Coiner, Le Sueur sought “to dismantle traditional views of bourgeois individualism and move toward collective social change” (*Better Red* 10). Coiner maintains that this is the heart as well as the goal of Le Sueur’s style. Coiner further bases her own analysis of Le Sueur on the work of M. M. Bakhtin and what he called “‘Heteroglossia’—a ‘multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships’” (qtd. in Coiner *Better Red* 10). One can certainly read through Le Sueur the stories of many women, not only her own. The challenge to the reader is to listen not only to the “multiplicity of social voices” but to hear the commonality between the voices, tending toward the “collective social change” she desired to bring about. Particularly in her articles of reportage during the early years of the Great Depression, a close reading of her works reveals how Le Sueur’s use of language helps to achieve the desired effect of immersing herself and her readers into events in order to promote social change.

Le Sueur’s ultimate goal to immerse her readers into her subject, the lives of women in need, is achieved right away in 1932’s “Women on the Breadlines.” In short, direct sentences Le Sueur gets right to the point as she writes of her experience in the waiting room of an employment office with other women. Within the first few sentences, Le Sueur transitions from “I” to “We” and she rarely goes back to the first-person singular pronoun for the rest of the piece: “I am sitting in the city free employment bureau. It’s the women’s section. We have been sitting here now for four hours. We sit here every day, waiting for a job” (137). For the remainder of the article, she mainly uses “we,” the first-person plural pronoun, in order to show that the thoughts and feelings she is describing are not those of a single person, but a whole room full of women in similar

situations. This is not just a writer's conceit, for Le Sueur was at that time an unemployed mother of two. Her visit to the employment office is not only as a reporter, but as one of the women hoping to receive aid (Rabinowitz *Labor* 2). Robert Shulman praises Le Sueur's narrative style in *The Power of Political Art: The 1930s Literary Left Reconsidered*. "Le Sueur's achievement is to focus on these women at the bottom, not at a distance from them but as one of them. As a participant observer, her narrative stance is close to the women whose situation she shares" (48).

The employment office Le Sueur describes in the article is a charity, a free service at the YWCA that is trying to help women find work, but either there is no work to be had or the women in the waiting room are not suitable for what is available. At this early point in the Great Depression, the women's humiliation comes from the sense that they have failed in some way. They still believe that they should be able to provide for themselves, or that their families should still be intact and sustainable. This belief is a symptom of the national mythology of rugged individualism. To Le Sueur's readers, it is still the dominant mode of thought. They would not think of it in those terms, because one seldom questions the underlying assumptions of his or her own culture. By exposing these assumptions for what they are—only one mode of thought and able to be changed—she helps along the process of rewriting the national mythology in favor of more communal actions.

For many of the women in this article, their husbands have already left to look for work wherever it may be. Some will never hear from those husbands again. What is left for the women to do but to find work or turn to charity hand-outs? According to the notions of rugged individualism to go on charity is a weakness. Le Sueur tells the reader:

There is no work. Sitting in the room we all know it. That is why we don't talk much. We look at the floor dreading to see that knowledge in each other's eyes. There is a kind of humiliation in it. We look away from each other. We look at the floor. It's too terrible to see this animal terror in each other's eyes. (137)

Le Sueur describes women going on charity as both docile and cunning, implying a certain cleverness born of deceit. At the same time, she implies that the stronger women, the proud women, will starve rather than damage their reputations by going to charities. Of that kind of woman, the kind that will go to the charities, Le Sueur writes, "Sometimes she gets help from the charities. If she's clever she can get herself a good living from the charities, if she's naturally a lick spittle, naturally a little docile and cunning. If she's proud then she starves silently" (137). In this way Le Sueur exposes the predicament women face because of the prevailing attitudes toward charity and the women who need it. She does not have to come out and say it any more plainly that women are starving and dying because of these attitudes.

Le Sueur continues the article by relating the stories of some of the women waiting in the employment office. There are young and old alike, for the Depression has not spared anyone because of age. As the months have gone on, the effects of poverty have begun to show. A sense of shame pervades this article. Not only is it felt by the women who are forced to turn to charity, but also by those who administer the charity. One gets the feeling that the YWCA woman wishes she could do more, but is ashamed that she cannot lest it reflect badly on herself or her organization. The attitudes that need

changing are not just those of the women seeking relief, but also those of the charities dispensing it.

One young woman, Ellen, gets into a fight with the woman running the employment office. Because of her poverty, she can no longer maintain a presentable appearance, though that is still expected of someone looking for work. Le Sueur notices:

In the eight months of unemployment she [Ellen] had gotten ragged, and the woman was shouting that she would not send her out like that. . . .

“We can’t recommend you like that,” the harassed YWCA woman said, knowing she was starving, unable to do anything. And the girls and the woman sat docilely, their eyes on the ground, ashamed to look at each other, ashamed of something. (139)

No one else in the office can say or do anything to contradict the reasoning behind what they have just seen, even though they and the reader have now experienced the same feeling of frustration at these contradictory impulses.

In earlier times of prosperity, charities and local governments were better able to provide assistance for those in need. During the early years of the Great Depression, before Roosevelt’s New Deal, President Hoover’s approach of doing very little at the federal level and relying on private charities and local governments prevailed. Churches and other charitable organizations would have to deal with the human toll that the devastated economy had taken. The federal government was not involved on a personal level. Very soon those local governments and private charities were overwhelmed, and even if they had not been, there were still those who would not or could not turn to them for assistance.

Le Sueur notices that women have a much different attitude toward charitable assistance than do men. The experience of bread lines, flop houses, missions, and generally living rough are synonymous with the Great Depression. Le Sueur points out that women endure hard times as well, but they are not visible. They choose not to be. They suffer, but out of sight. She observes:

It's one of the great mysteries of the city where women go when they are out of work and hungry. There are not many women in the bread line.

There are no flop houses for women as there are for men, where a bed can be had for a quarter or less. You don't see women lying on the floor at the mission in the free flops. They obviously don't sleep in the jungle or under newspapers in the park. There is no law I suppose against their being in these places but the fact is they rarely are. (140-41)

Women try to keep up appearances as best they can, but it is hard to do when the money is gone and the family structure has disintegrated.

Le Sueur's writings are a means of showing the real story of desperate women. She tells their stories so her readers will come to understand the women as victims of the economy, as victims of moralistic charities, and as victims of an indifferent government. Even those who do eventually turn to charity are often turned away because of the perception that destitute women are suspect. Le Sueur mentions other women who have turned to prostitution in order to support themselves. The prejudice of the charities is that women who have fallen into economic distress are broke and hungry because of their moral unfitness. A woman in need of a job is automatically capable of any depravity, including prostitution. They are not given a chance to work their way out of poverty,

because it is assumed that they deserve to be destitute, unworthy of the very charity that could change their lives. Le Sueur writes:

Try to get into the YW without any money or looking down at the heel.
Charities take care of very few and only those that are called ‘deserving.’
The lone girl is under suspicion by the virgin women who dispense
charity. (141)

The same American Dream that said that anything was possible with hard work is now turned against them. Because they are hungry, they must have brought it upon themselves. The scant resources of the overstrained charities will be given only to those deemed worthy. The process of proving worthy in the eyes of charitable organizations or government bureaucracy is further explored in Le Sueur’s later articles where the stories become even more tragic, and the author herself moves closer to achieving the communal sensibility she is seeking to instill in her readers.

Another technique Le Sueur employs is to directly address the reader through use of second-person narration. In 1934’s “Women Are Hungry,” originally published in *The American Mercury* magazine, Le Sueur addresses the reader at first as you might when relating a story of your experiences to someone. She begins this technique of direct address in the first line of the article: “When you look at the unemployed women and girls you think instantly that there must be some kind of war” (144). Later she uses the first-person plural “we” to describe her visits with several women who then proceed to tell their stories, implying that “you” are a companion on this journey into the lives of hungry and desperate women. “We listened at the door and then we knocked” (145). The stories of real women in hard times form the basis for the rest of the article. The stories

illustrate the problems of dealing with charities and government bureaucracies. They reflect the realities of life for women trying to survive, to find food, or to get a job. Going by government statistics will not show what real hunger is really like, but writing about the lives of women affected by the Depression will give a more complete picture of how real women in the heartland of the country survived or died during hard times. Le Sueur tells their stories because “You don’t see women in bread lines. Statistics make unemployment abstract and not too uncomfortable. The human being is different. To be hungry is different than to count the hungry” (145). By immersing the reader into the stories of these women, Le Sueur makes the reader feel what it is to be hungry, not just to count the hungry.

Le Sueur states that women are the first to feel the effects of hard times. This is because women react to this kind of adversity differently. Throughout the article, Le Sueur asserts that women mainly suffer silently and alone, isolated from the comfort of others, of bread lines, and of organized charities. She asserts, “Poverty is more personal to them than men. The women looking for jobs or bumming on the road, or that you see waiting for a hand-out from the charities, are already mental cases as well as physical ones” (144). The women you see accepting charity are already stated to be “mental cases” in Le Sueur’s words because they are reacting in a way that is not normal for them. The women try to hold the family together in the absence of the men who have gone off looking for work and who may never return. They are used to working and sacrificing all for the family, for the children, but there is no longer any work to be had.

Many of the women Le Sueur meets are struggling to raise children, legitimate or otherwise, after being abandoned by the men who fathered them. A man may take his

pleasure and be free to move on, but women must be careful of the consequences of taking up with such men. One woman Le Sueur writes about, Bernice, “Is quite moral, because she is afraid of the hazard of being immoral. She is afraid of what men do, she knows how men are” (149). Charities and the authorities are also less likely to help if they sense immorality in the young women. The prejudice against the destitute is once again made clear in this article. To be unsuccessful, to be poor, is taken as a sign of moral weakness and makes one suspect, even criminal in the eyes of those who do not know what it is like to be poor. “The police are pretty hard on a lone girl. When the police see you wandering they always think you are bad if you are a girl. Bernice and her kind are simply hungry. But the police wouldn’t think you were wandering out of many kinds of hunger” (149).

Though Bernice is trying to keep out of that kind of trouble, not every young woman is as careful. For a woman who has “fallen” there are other consequences. She could lose her freedom and even her ability to have children. “Next to Bernice lives her girl friend Mabel, who has to keep pretty clever, too, to keep the charities from running her into Faribault. They want to have her sterilized and put into the home for girls at Faribault” (149). For Mabel, the consequence is not just pregnancy, but possible sterilization because she has already had an illegitimate child. It is the charities that want to sterilize her and put her into an institution, because they have decided that she is irresponsible. “Last year she had a baby, so of course all the charities are down on her” (149). Instead of just helping a woman like Mabel, who needs to support herself and a child, they want to take away the possibility of her having any more destitute children. This is the reality for many women fallen on hard times. Their stories should provoke

outrage at the way the women are treated by charities and government officials. These are the attitudes that Le Sueur hopes to change through her articles.

There are many other girls living like Bernice and Mabel, always looking out for a way to get by, to take what work they can get. They also get some handouts from the charities when they can. Even in the worst of times, there is a desire within the women to try to lead a normal life, to try a recipe from a ladies' journal for cake even though it means not eating for a few weeks. It is worth it to them to feel normal and human again. Le Sueur emphasizes that the women are trying to lead a normal life, and would gladly work for a living if only there were jobs available to them. The rest of the time, the women are making a living any way they can. They know where to get hand-outs, where to beg, and how to find a bargain. In other words, they are demonstrating a kind of resourcefulness that is perfectly in keeping with rugged individualism. They just have to do so outside of the traditional role society otherwise expects them to occupy.

Sometimes they find a man who can look after them for a while, but they remain wary. Le Sueur warns, "Keep away from men and marriage, because there isn't anything in it for a girl but a horde of children to be left with" (150). For many other women who are no longer able to go the way of the "lone wolf" there is still the appeal to government institutions and private charities. She writes:

Their families are gone. They are alone now. Let the State take care of them. The State is their only family now and they look to it. They have transferred even the quarrels with their families to the charities and the State. They complain lovingly and bitterly about the food they get, the coal, the care at the clinics. They adore going to the clinics; they enjoy the

sensation of importance that they have, as if for a moment the State cared passionately for their health. (150-151)

This passage ends with a sarcastic tone, as Le Sueur makes it clear that the clinics and other relief services of the State are anything but passionately caring. Nothing could illustrate that point more than the story of a former teacher seeking relief, which is the most wrenching of the stories Le Sueur relates in this article.

In section IV, about a former teacher named Nancy Sanderson, Le Sueur uses second-person mode to narrate Nancy's story as if the reader were Nancy herself. Through the narrative shifts in this section, Le Sueur is able to immerse the reader into the life of this otherwise anonymous woman on relief, in order to make the reader realize what such women are truly experiencing. She does this through directly addressing the reader in the second-person mode as "you."

This does not happen all at once. The reader is eased into the role of Nancy in stages. At first, the reader might feel that he or she is being given some information, albeit in this second-person form:

To get any relief work, if you are a teacher, and haven't had any work for a couple of years and have spent all your savings and let your insurance go and pawned everything you own, you have to go to the Board that is handling the relief work for teachers and *prove* to them that you are destitute. You not only have to be destitute but you have to prove it. They are both hard but the last is harder. (151)

At first, you are not clear who is being addressed. Are you the reader, or are you an unemployed teacher? Moreover, this passage reinforces the idea that there is some means

of “proof” that one needs in order to prove destitution. It is a humiliating process, taking the last shred of dignity that a person has, and that is often the last thing they are able to part with.

There then follows a paragraph describing that this scenario is the life of Nancy Sanderson. It is comfortably third-person narration, and pulls the reader out of the story just long enough to give the necessary background on Nancy’s life up to this point. “Nancy Sanderson’s father had been a skilled glass blower. He had made pretty good money in his time before they invented a machine to take the place of the man. [. . .] Old Sanderson fortunately is dead, but his daughters and sons are not dead, except one daughter who is now dead because she chose it” (151). This last sentence ominously sets up the end of Nancy’s tale of receiving the state’s charity.

After allowing the reader to lapse into this third-person narration, Le Sueur then switches back to second-person and returns you to the role:

To prove you are destitute you have to go to the State House after having sent your application in before so it would be there ahead of you and everybody would know thoroughly about your being destitute, and then you have to put on your best things and go up there and see if they will give you one of those night classes for the unemployed, to teach. (151-52)

The second-person passages thus far in Nancy’s story emphasize the need to prove destitution. It is reinforced through this style of narration in order to make you, the reader, know what it is that the real subject, Nancy, experienced.

At that point, there is once again a paragraph of third-person mode which begins, “She is alone, and it is hard for a lone woman to get much attention from the charities.

She spent the last of her money last spring, all but about fifty dollars, and she does not know how she has been living” (152). This paragraph describes how Nancy has been surviving thus far, on the kindness of friends at times, and how she has tried to keep up appearances.

For the remainder of this section, the narration switches between second-person and third-person very freely. Sometimes the reader is the unemployed teacher, Nancy, and sometimes the reader is outside looking in. The effect of describing Nancy’s reactions and emotional states as your own puts you the reader into the story even further. Starting with the next paragraph—“So you feel terrible going up to the capitol office building” (152)—the narration is primarily second-person. This constitutes the complete integration of the reader into the story. You go from hearing a story second-hand, to hearing the stories for yourself, until finally you become the subject herself. Scene details or the dialogue of the other people are sometimes given in third-person, but the reactions of Nancy are the reactions of “you.” This paragraph illustrates the frequent switch between narrative modes:

Nancy Sanderson sat down, biting her teeth together, holding her wet hands tight in her lap. She looked all right. To look at her you would have thought she was all right. But hunger tears through you like a locomotive. You can hear your own heart like a trip hammer. You can hear your own blood in your ears like a cataract and you can’t hear anything else. You are separated by your tremendous hunger from the ordinary world as if by a tragedy. You can’t see what is happening. You can’t hear what is being said. (153)

The confusion of the reader reflects the confusion of Nancy in this situation. Just as it is difficult for the reader to fathom the expectations of the government workers who will decide on her worthiness (or lack of it) for charity purposes, so it is difficult for Nancy to know what is expected of her.

Both Nancy and the reader are brought to the same hopeless feeling that government relief is a catch-22. The man says, “You see, to get this, you have to prove absolute destitution” (153). However, Nancy has indicated that at one time she had fifty dollars and now cannot account for how she has spent it. Of course, she spent it keeping herself alive up to this point. The man cannot give her relief if she has any money, nor can he believe that she has none now. He says, “No, then what have you been living on? You must have been living on something. How have you been living?” (153). She cannot be alive if she has no money, and she cannot qualify for relief if she has any money to keep herself alive. It is a hopeless situation that Le Sueur has made the reader feel as well.

As the man continues to badger Nancy, the narration returns to third-person. The immersion in Nancy’s life is over. After being a part of her hopes and fears, the effect is emotionally numbing to the reader, just as Nancy herself feels emotionally numb. As Nancy walks out of the office and out into the city Le Sueur writes, “People saw her walking and she looked all right so they paid no attention until she was dead” (154). Nancy has jumped off of a bridge and committed suicide. This is the most jarring episode in this article. After complete identification with Nancy, the reader has become emotionally invested in her life only to have it end with this tragedy. Le Sueur has made

sure that the impact on the reader is like that of Nancy falling into the cold waters of the river.

Through this manipulation of narrative mode, Le Sueur has cunningly made the reader feel the distress that Nancy must have felt—the frustration, the helplessness, and the hopelessness that all led her to that final act of desperation. Though it is too late now for Nancy, there is still hope. If enough people can be made to realize that women like Nancy and the others are otherwise worthy individuals who have been traumatized by hard times and the indifference of the old philosophy of rugged individualism, then those people can work together to solve the problems or at least relieve the suffering of the Depression's forgotten victims. Le Sueur's achievement in "Women Are Hungry" is to help the reader identify with women like Nancy. Her masterpiece of immersion into her subject is more personal and yet represents the culmination of what she hopes her readers can also attain: a complete merging with the collective in order to effect social change.

One of Le Sueur's most frequently cited and reprinted pieces of reportage is also one in which she describes complete loss of her own individuality and absorption into a collective identity while witnessing, reporting on, and becoming a part of the Minneapolis Teamster's Strike of 1934. Elaine Hedges notes in her introduction to *Ripening*, the 1986 edition of Le Sueur's collected works, that in "I Was Marching" Le Sueur "Charts the stages of her participation in the collective strike effort, and presents a sense of fusing with a larger reality; as she merges with others, it is as if a new reality were coming into being" (9). Nora Ruth Roberts argues that "This then constitutes one of Le Sueur's most concerted efforts to depict the act of belonging, of shedding what she will later call her 'maggotty [sic] individualism'" (45). In "I Was Marching" Le Sueur

achieves this effect not just through replacement of first-person singular “I” with the plural “we” during the course of the article, but through powerful statements describing her emotional state through the course of the strike. Robert Shulman notes that Le Sueur’s approach in this article is in keeping with other Marxist visions of social change, while using herself as an example for her readers: “The individual develops fully through meaningful action as part of an evolving community, but not at the expense of his or her individuality. Le Sueur thus makes her own personal transformation a particular instance of a general possibility” (68). She make use of her own feelings as an outsider looking in, identifying herself with her readers whom she thinks feel the same way, and then describes how those barriers are broken down for her.

Le Sueur begins the piece describing her initial impressions and lack of experience in the matter of strikes. It is important to note that here in the first few lines Le Sueur employs both “I” and “you” pronouns, situating herself and her reader within the story that is about to unfold. Le Sueur, “I,” is within the text as a first-person narrator, but “you” are also going to be along with her: “I have never been in a strike before. It is like looking at something that is happening for the first time and there are no thoughts and no words yet accrued to it. If you come from the middle class, words are likely to mean more than an event” (158). She also situates both “you” and “I” in the middle class, her target audience. She knows what a middle-class reaction to the strike looks and feels like, and begins her immersion in the event from that perspective.

At first, Le Sueur is an observer, reluctant to get involved. If it is her job as a reporter to maintain a professional detachment to the scene this behavior makes sense. “I stayed close to the door, watching. I didn’t go in. I was afraid they would put me out. I

could remain a spectator” (158). It also makes sense from the perspective of someone who feels like this is a matter not belonging to her own or her readers’ middle class interests. Le Sueur recognizes the reluctance of the middle class to get involved, but she is writing this piece in order to get them involved. “I am putting down exactly how I felt, because I believe others of my class feel the same as I did. I believe it stands for an important psychic change that must take place in all” (158). Through her own experience she hopes to show that the barriers can come down and that there need not be any distinction between classes.

Le Sueur tentatively enters the strike headquarters, still just observing. There is still reluctance to place herself fully into the situation. Here she shows that she is really conscious from the very beginning that what she will experience is a loss of individual identity when joining the collective efforts of the strikers. It is not just fear of an unknown situation, but fear that she will lose her sense of self. “The truth is I was afraid. Not of the physical danger at all, but an awful fright of mixing, of losing myself, of being unknown and lost. I felt inferior. I felt no one would know me there, that all I had been trained to excel in would go unnoticed” (158-59). She describes the process of becoming part of the collective in terms of her physicality, not just her psychology. According to Joseph Entin in *Sensational Modernism: Experimental Fiction and Photography in Thirties America*, “The narrator undergoes a transformation that alters the way she inhabits her own body as well as the manner in which she perceives what occurs both to her and around her” (66). This psychological and physical transformation is mirrored in Le Sueur’s use of narrative point-of-view, switching freely between “I” and “we” depending on her sense of individuality versus assimilation into the collective.

She recognizes that there is a different ethos among the strikers than she is used to. The world of the strikers, their collective spirit and the common purpose, both excites and repels her not just because it is foreign to her, but because she believes she cannot be a part of it. “I felt I excelled in competing with others and I knew instantly that these people were NOT competing at all, that they were acting in a strange, powerful trance of movement *together*. And I was filled with longing to act with them and fear that I could not” (159). Just the same, she feels that what the strikers stand for is the right cause, and knows that she cannot stay on the sidelines. She writes, “In these terrible happenings you cannot be neutral now. No one can be neutral in the face of bullets” (159). This echoes the statements that Le Sueur made in her journals regarding the strike and her determination to become personally involved. She will later flesh these thoughts out in “The Fetish of Being Outside,” which is more than just a defense or justification of her writing style—it was a manifesto of what she believed the role of an author should be in order to bring about social change.

Le Sueur is allowed into the strike headquarters because they need help, especially in the roles women were filling, though she is still afraid she will be rejected as an outsider. Despite now being on the inside of the building, she maintains a separation between “I” and “they,” between herself and the strikers. “I kept feeling they would put me out. No one paid any attention” (160).

Le Sueur then asks if she can help, and joins with other women in serving coffee and buttermilk to the men who have returned from the strike. One of the women who had been working in the kitchen for some time already does not treat Le Sueur as an outsider as she had feared. It is neither an acceptance into the collective nor a rejection of Le

Sueur as an individual; instead it reflects the behavior of the women as part of the vast machinery supporting the strike. “She didn’t pay any special attention to me as an individual. She didn’t seem to be thinking of me, she didn’t seem to see me. . . . Then I saw instantly she didn’t see me because she saw only what she was doing” (160). This imagery is reinforced by the way the kitchen is run as an assembly line. “I found the kitchen organized like a factory. Nobody asks my name. I am given a large butcher’s apron. I realize I have never before worked anonymously” (160). With hardly a word, Le Sueur has been made part of the factory-style kitchen, another anonymous cog in the machine. It is the first step toward total immersion in the group experience.

Word is starting to come back to headquarters about what is happening out on the picket line. Le Sueur senses the emotions running through the room. The words she has chosen to convey her feelings leave no doubt that she is not thinking of herself as an individual as much as a member of the group now. “A terrible communal excitement ran through the hall like a fire through a forest. I could hardly breathe. I seemed to have no body at all except the body of this excitement” (161). More than that, she emphasizes this by removing her emotions from her physical body, as if that individual body has been one of the things keeping her separate from the community of strikers.

Soon, trouble has begun on the picket line and injured strikers are brought back to headquarters. It is during this crisis that the final barriers are broken down for Le Sueur. This is the moment in which the physical and psychological individual first merges with the collective, and it is achieved in a moment of crisis: “If you are to understand anything you must understand it in the muscular event, in actions we have not been trained for. Something broke all my surfaces in something that was beyond horror and I was dabbing

alcohol on the gaping wounds that buckshot makes, hanging open like crying mouths” (162). The phrase “something broke all my surfaces” makes clear that the last vestiges of separation from the experience she is immersed in have been breached. It makes those barriers seem as permeable as a soap bubble, or the surface tension in a body of water. They are tangible, but ultimately fragile. She has managed for some time to maintain them, but they have been overcome by a greater force. Entin argues: “The notion of ‘surfaces breaking’ suggests a cubistlike explosion of traditional vision, a new conception of reality emerging in the midst of social crisis and collective action” (67). For Le Sueur, and by extension for her readers, this shows that it is possible to achieve immersion into a collective, the barriers are intangible rather than insurmountable.

For the rest of that night, Le Sueur ceases to refer to the strikers as “they,” but instead uses “we,” such as in this sentence which stands alone as its own paragraph: “We have living blood on our skirts” (162). Though she refers to herself, and describes the emotions running through her, the emphasis is on how her individuality is being caught up in the collective thought, action, and voice of the crowd. She reflects:

I am one of them, yet I don't feel myself at all. It is curious, I feel most alive and yet for the first time in my life I do not feel myself as separate. I realize then that all my previous feelings have been based on feeling myself separate and distinct from others and now I sense sharply faces, bodies, closeness, and my own fear is not my own alone, nor my hope.

(163)

Le Sueur joins with the men and women as they march into action again, caught up in the rhythm of the crowd as she has never been before. Though she has questions, no one

answers. “The wide dilated eyes of the women were like my own. No one seemed to be answering questions now. They simply spoke, cried out, moved together now” (164). She is still enough of the outsider to not know what is exactly happening, but she senses that the crowd as a whole knows what to do even if the individual members do not know the whole of the event yet. In expressing the actions of individuals in the crowd this way, she reinforces the idea that they are not actually individuals, but they act as they do as a function of the larger collective. “Men sprang up to direct whatever action was needed and then subsided again and no one had noticed who it was. They stepped forward to direct a needed action and then fell anonymously back again” (164). Somehow they know what to do; they do it, and are once more nameless cells in the body of the marching crowd.

This is the sense of community and of collective social change that Le Sueur has been leading herself and her readers toward for a long time. It is not just in “I Was Marching,” but in previous articles. It was unformed or embryonic as yet in “Women on the Breadlines,” and unspoken but in the background of “Women are Hungry.” Here it is finally fully articulated through Le Sueur’s actions in the strike and her description of how this collaborative effort of individuals working as a whole can bring about effective change.

Le Sueur herself is finally able to feel that kind of collective sensibility at the climax of her activity in the march that day. It dawns on her slowly, and she is unsure what she is feeling at first: “I felt uneasy. It was as if something escaped me. And then suddenly, on my very body, I knew what they were doing, as if it had been communicated to me from a thousand eyes, a thousand silent throats, as if it had been

shouted in the loudest voice. THEY WERE BUILDING A BARRICADE” (164). She makes it clear that no one has actually told her this outright, nor has it been ordered by anyone and communicated to the rest as a command. The crowd has just done what it knew it needed to do. The individuals in the crowd do their part not as individuals but as parts of the whole. It is a transcendent but fleeting moment of unity, and it is one that can be achieved again.

When it is over, Le Sueur’s individual identity is once more in the forefront. In the aftermath of the strike, Le Sueur is once again hesitant to join in the march that occurs as part of the funeral for the strikers who were killed. She has once more separated herself physically, emotionally and grammatically from the collective. She refers to herself once again as “I” and the strikers as “they” when describing her reluctance to rejoin them: “I felt they might not want me” (164). Nonetheless, she still wants to be a part of the march that is about to take place. It is only her own uneasiness that really keeps her apart. When she takes the initiative to stop standing on the sidelines and approaches some other women, she finds that they accept her right away. “Three women drew me in. ‘We all want to march,’ they said gently. ‘Come with us’” (164).

In these final two paragraphs of the article, Le Sueur describes her complete absorption into the body of the marchers. This is the culmination of the experience she has been seeking since the events of the article began. Though she continues to use the personal pronoun “I” in these paragraphs, she does not give the same sense that “I” is separated from “they.” Instead, her “I” is one of many just like her, and she is one of the nameless crowd, each member just like her and experiencing the same events. What happens to all happens to one, and what happens to one happens to all.

As she joins the march, Le Sueur feels the energy of the crowd throughout her body. She feels that she is the crowd and the crowd is her:

I was marching with a million hands, movements, faces, and my own movement was repeating again and again, making a new movement from these many gestures, the walking, falling back, the open mouth crying, the nostrils stretched apart, the raised hand, the blow falling, and the outstretched hand drawing me in.

I felt my legs straighten. I felt my feet join in that strange shuffle of thousands of bodies moving with direction, of thousands of feet, and my own breath with the gigantic breath. As if an electric charge had passed through me, my hair stood on end. I was marching. (165)

Through the immersion of Le Sueur's "I" into the collective actions of the march, she shows her readers how easy it is—how exhilarating it is—to become a part of a much larger engine for social change.

At the time of the strike, and of "I Was Marching," it was still relatively early in the Depression. The New Deal under President Roosevelt had begun but was still an experiment in progress, and many possibilities existed that could drive American society further into individual isolationism or further toward collective action. Shulman praises Le Sueur's efforts in helping to tip the balance toward an attitude of collective sensibility rather than back to the old attitude of individualism:

Her achievement is that she records the felt reality of a present moment, embodies the living dialectics of a changed individual and a transformed society, and inspires her readers to struggle toward a communal future. . . .

Le Sueur speaks for a precious moment in American history when, poised between present and future, these possibilities were a living part of a national dialogue. (73)

Reading Le Sueur's works of reportage, "Women on the Breadlines," "Women Are Hungry," and "I Was Marching," one gets a sense of the progression toward the communal sensibility as it evolved in her own outlook. She writes of women who are initially ashamed to receive charity, and though they are all in the same situation the attitude of judgment persists throughout "Women on the Breadlines." By the time she writes "Women Are Hungry" there is little of that shame left from the women toward each other, though they are still made to feel it by the charities and the government. Finally, in "I Was Marching" there are numerous instances where an individual can take destiny into her own hands by joining with a mass movement of others who are also seeking change. In bringing her readers along with her on this journey through isolation into collective change, Le Sueur shows that the only real positive change will come when enough individuals are willing to join together to make a difference.

Tom Kromer's *Waiting for Nothing*

The search for respect and common decency in the face of grinding poverty and an indifferent world is at the heart of Tom Kromer's *Waiting for Nothing* (1935). It is the story of an individual and his struggle to survive, the charitable organizations and individuals that help to varying degrees, as well as his sense of commonality with other individuals engaged in the same struggle. Kromer focuses on the "forgotten man" who is being ignored at the bottom of society just as Meridel Le Sueur's works brought attention to the forgotten women of the Depression. Where in Le Sueur's works a communal sensibility is finally achieved through involvement in a common cause, Kromer's characters find it almost impossible to connect in any permanent and life-altering way because of the way they are pitted against life, the system of organized charity, and each other.

It is difficult for the "stiffs" in Kromer's work to have any sense of community, as the word is usually defined, but they do manage a sort of crude society made up of those at the absolute bottom of the ladder. Inasmuch as they exist outside normal society, the stiffs form a kind of society all their own. In that society they have learned to distrust one another just as they are distrusted by those who are not also "on the stem." They are especially distrusted and mistreated by those charitable institutions that supposedly exist to take care of the destitute, while individual acts of charity are often shown to be nothing of the sort. Kromer's mainly autobiographical novel explores the loneliness of such a life as well as the few moments of solidarity with others—moments of communal

sensibility—that his narrator manages to experience before he is forced to return to his empty existence of simply trying to survive.

Nevertheless, there is still a sense that the stiff Tom Kromer retains his values and his feeling of community with others despite the horrible experiences he suffers. He does not go through with his planned mugging in the novel's opening scene, nor does he follow through with a bank robbery later. He is down and out, but still recognizably a rugged individual doing the best he can to survive the worst of times. Like Meridel Le Sueur's articles, or the photographs by Dorothea Lange, Tom Kromer portrays the stiffs as human beings and fellow Americans who would get jobs if there were any to be had, who would work hard if given a chance, and who must ask for charity because it is the only way they will survive. Arthur Casciato and James West touch upon this and other themes of the novel in "Searching for Tom Kromer," the afterword to the 1986 edition of Kromer's works. They write, "Tom Kromer has transformed what could have been a documentary of skid-row life into an artistic creation that traces a personal struggle to preserve human virtues and emotions in the face of a brutal and dehumanizing reality" (284).

The reality is that hardly anyone in Kromer's experience is willing to help out another human being just for the sake of pure charity. Many do help, but exact something in return. Through his novel, Tom Kromer is not just exposing the practices of these wolves in charitable clothing; he is showing the readers examples of good and true charity as well. In both the bad and the good episodes Kromer demonstrates time and again that charity is not truly charity when it comes with a price. In so doing, Kromer works toward changing his readers' prevailing attitudes toward charity and those who

receive it. He is working to rewrite the national mythology of rugged individualism and replace it with something more like Le Sueur's communal sensibility.

Tom Kromer based the novel on his own experiences living through the worst years of the Depression as a vagrant. It can be confusing at times to distinguish between the author, Tom Kromer, and the narrator of the novel. They are one in the same, as the narrator makes this plain in chapter two of the novel when he is arrested for sleeping in an abandoned building and hauled before a judge. The biographical details given by Tom Kromer the narrator are those of Tom Kromer the author. He has created a character, the narrator Tom Kromer, based upon his own life in order to tell a story. Tom Kromer is not the average stiff, though he is supposed to represent one in the novel. He was college educated, but never graduated. At Marshall College one of his assignments was to disguise himself as a panhandler in order "to show how easily people could be duped by fraudulent vagrants" (Casciato and West 265). In writing an article about the experience, Kromer advised that giving money to panhandlers was a waste, and that the money should be given to organized charities like the Community Chest instead, where they could be better managed for those who really were in need and deserving of charity.

He must have come to regret ever writing that article when the Depression hit and he became a vagrant for real instead of for an afternoon. His writings about the real experiences he had during the worst Depression years demonstrate a profound shift in Kromer's ideals. When faced with the necessity of actually living as a stiff instead of just pretending to be one for a few hours, Kromer came to know the reality of a situation he had previously mocked. His novel *Waiting for Nothing* is a way to show his readers that same life as he lived it, and elicit action toward ending the worst injustices he describes.

In Hope Among Us Yet: Social Criticism and Social Solace in Depression America

David Peeler characterizes *Waiting for Nothing* and similar novels of the time: “The authors drew upon a sizeable body of painful personal experience and, in the Depression environment, managed to recast that pain as a universal human experience” (171). That is an important aspect of *Waiting for Nothing*. Kromer’s ability to portray the stiff as human beings who should not be allowed to become forgotten men. For this reason, critics like Peeler place Kromer along with other works from the same era in the category of “social novel” or “proletarian novel” with some debate between them as to the exact nature of what should be included and why. Authors like Terry Cooney, Morris Dickstein, and Barbara Foley try to situate Kromer’s novel in the context of class struggle. As with Le Sueur, there is a tendency to see the author’s own affiliation with socialist causes as affecting their narratives or affecting their whole body of work. However, both Le Sueur and Kromer are more than mere hacks repeating a party line. They focus on telling stories that are not embraced by the party leaders. There is a nod to revolutionary ideology through the characters of Karl and Werner in chapter six of *Waiting for Nothing*. However, beyond that the novel does not openly advocate for class struggle. The only focus of Tom Kromer the narrator is a struggle to survive.

As an author Tom Kromer progressed in an ever more radical direction during the course of his career. Later works convey a more radical ideology, such as his 1936 short story “Hungry Men.” As Casciato and West observe, “The story ends as a hundred flophouse stiff join locked-out motormen in turning over streetcars during the 1934 Los Angeles Yellow Car strike” (287). *Waiting for Nothing* is a step along Kromer’s way toward that more revolutionary writing, but it is not overtly radical in its own right. On its

own the novel acts best as a means of telling the story of one of the many faceless forgotten men who must concern themselves on a daily basis more with survival than with political philosophy. By telling as true a story as he can, Kromer makes more progress in exposing the inequities of the system than if he had written a more openly political novel. The subversive nature of *Waiting for Nothing* is in exposing the system of supposed charities that preyed on stiffies while claiming to help them, not in shouting for revolution to overturn that system. Through the story of his experiences, Kromer places the burden of doing something about it upon his readers.

In writing *Waiting for Nothing* Tom Kromer uses the language of the bums and hobos, the slang terms and mannerisms. It seems jolting to a modern ear, but the slang terms do not seem to have raised many concerns at the time regarding their accuracy. Contemporary reviewers praised Kromer's work for being an authentic account of life as a vagrant. According to critic William Stott, other elements of Kromer's style have more literary roots, echoing both Shakespeare and Ernest Hemingway. In *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* Stott contends that Kromer's style is "a pastiche of tough-guy jargon, [and a] pseudo-biblical lack of contractions" (196). Stott argues that these elements undermine the authenticity that contemporary reviewers had praised, and instead show a deliberate attempt to be more or less self-consciously literary. The pseudo-biblical diction noted by Stott forms the core of Mary Obropta's critique of the novel as well. For Obropta, that pseudo-biblical lack of contractions is a way that Kromer imitates and mocks the style of "religious testimony" popular in religious movements and especially the missions that Kromer encounters over and over in the novel. It is another layer of complexity in what on first read one assumes to be the tale of a common vagrant.

Kromer's use of literary styles, even that of religious testimony, shows that Kromer was deliberately reaching out to audiences who would understand the message that his stylistic choices convey. By echoing Shakespeare and Hemingway he ties his own narrator to similar heroes of these other works. They are tough, resilient, and admirable even when they are down. In mocking the tone of religious testimony while experiencing the so-called charity of the missions, he brings the hypocrisy of false religious sentiment to the front and center of several chapters.

Kromer himself states in his "Autobiography" (included for the first time in the 1935 British publication of *Waiting for Nothing*) that "The 'Stiff' idiom is, of course, authentic" (259). It is part of the method Kromer uses to connect his story to the here and now of the Great Depression. Though the slang is now outdated, it is appropriate to the tale as much for verisimilitude as for shock effect: "I wrote it just as I felt it, and used the language that stiffs use even when it wasn't always the nicest language in the world" (259). Casciato and West contend that part of the genius of the novel lies in the way Kromer not only uses the argot of the streets, but also the repetition of it throughout the story as a kind of refrain to reinforce the monotony of life on the stem:

He does so in several ways: through the use of the vagrant idiom—words like "dinging," "stemming," and "dummy chunker," with which we become familiar through constant repetition; through the use of simple and repetitious sentence structures that reflect the monotony of "vag" life; and through the reappearance of key images, phrases, and sentences that come to function as buzz words of pain and boredom. (282)

The book functions as a sort of time capsule of the lifestyle of those at the very lowest rung of the economic ladder during the Great Depression. This is important because these are the stories most likely to be misunderstood by those who have never experienced that life firsthand, or only hear of it from those who also did not experience it firsthand. Tom Kromer lived those experiences and knew the hopelessness and stagnation of that life. He hopes to raise awareness in his audience by telling them his experiences and feelings. “In the act of writing this account, author Tom Kromer betrays his hope that the inhuman situation he describes can be corrected. [. . .] Kromer seems to believe that once people are shown degradation and injustice, they will do something to help” (Casciato and West 284). The author Tom Kromer would later criticize other works that attempted to do the same, but that did so without the authenticity of his own lived experience. In other novels of Depression-era bums and hobos, such as *Hungry Men* by Edward Anderson, the authors provide the kinds of improbable happy endings that betray the actual desperation of the stiffs that Kromer experienced. *Waiting for Nothing* has no happy ending, nor did its author.

Waiting for Nothing is a powerful story because the language is simple and direct, reducing the narrator’s motivations to the simplest level, that of survival. Food and shelter are basic human needs, and yet Kromer struggles throughout the novel to achieve even these most basic things. Through the indifference of others who are only looking out for themselves in their own way, society has abandoned Kromer and the other stiffs to this life. Organized charities have failed, and local government relief was overwhelmed and out of funds. Those missions or private individuals who did lend a hand are depicted in the novel as only looking out for their own goals. Where Le Sueur eventually found

her communal sensibility through joining with strikers and demonstrators, Kromer never finds lasting community. Kromer continues in episode after episode to try to crack the indifference of the larger society in hopes of getting a leg up, but he is inevitably worn down and sinks back into his own nihilistic attitude.

The psychological depression of the narrator, Kromer, is related to his inability to break out of the endless cycle of poverty, starvation, and homelessness. This acts as a sort of feedback loop through the course of the novel, and the effect is that there does not seem to be any course or plot to the novel at all. Kromer is stuck in a constant now, a present with no past and no future except the continuation of the same bleak waiting for something to change. It never does. He is waiting for nothing. In “Democratizing Literature: Issues in Teaching Working Class Literature” Nicholas Coles sums up Kromer’s chronologically stalled-out narrative style this way:

To register the aimlessness and tenuousness of life on the bum, Tom Kromer develops a narrative structure of nonprogression, a series of chapters each of which offers an instance, in no determinate order, of the daily search for “three hots and a flop.” This preservative effect is compounded by a style that crosses the street-language of the “stiffs” with an eerily child-like syntax. Together these elements enforce an obsessive focus on the fundamentals of survival. (676)

Casciato and West explore similar ideas in their essay. They reference E. M. Forster’s notion that “novelists are concerned more with love (usually sexual) and death than with birth, food, and sleep” (279). They go on to note that in *Waiting for Nothing* the characters’ priorities are “inverted.” In other words, the priorities Forster emphasizes are

far beyond what the characters of Kromer's work are capable of caring about because they have fallen so low. Those needs are not even in the realm of possibility for stiffies like Kromer who have other basic needs that must be met first. "There is little time for human relationships, sexual or otherwise; life on the stem is reduced to an endless daily struggle to find food and sleep" (279). Kromer can never hope to achieve more than just his next meal or his next bed for the night.

Casciato and West phrase the needs of Kromer's stiffies in more clinical psychological terms:

Kromer's universe aligns itself perfectly with what Abraham Maslow calls the "hierarchy of human needs." The economic and social upheaval of the Depression traps Kromer's characters on the lowest rung of Maslow's ladder of self-actualization—the physiological. Their needs—air, water, food, shelter, sleep—are "survival needs: a concern for immediate existence; to be able to eat, breathe, live at this moment." (279)

Through the constant repetition of Kromer's daily struggle to achieve these basic needs, he and the reader are trapped in this present-tense of fundamental survival without hope of anything more than just continued existence. In "On the Fritz: Tom Kromer's Imaging of the Machine," Hugh Crawford agrees that the intent of Kromer's style is to produce this very effect:

By narrating his tale in a disjointed, unstructured frame, Kromer can in part produce for the reader that qualitatively different experience of time. There is, throughout the text, a suspension of clock time and a substitution of biological time on the lowest possible level—human survival. (112)

Many other stiffs in the novel do not even manage those basic needs of human survival. They succumb to disease, cold, alcoholism and accidents; others resort to suicide when existence itself has become too hopeless.

The novel opens with Kromer contemplating the violent act of hitting a man with a length of pipe in order to rob him. He already talks as if he is desperate enough to injure others in order to survive. The character of “Tom Kromer” seems to have always been a stiff, and will always continue to be one. There is no sense of time passing, at least not in any progressive way. It is always now. Kromer is always broke, always hungry, and always cold. Even when he finds himself with some money, food, or shelter, it is only temporary. Sometimes it is gone without explanation in the next chapter. How much time has passed? It is difficult to tell. The chapters may as well be interchangeable, as Kromer always seems to be in a new, but still all-too-familiar situation. Far too often he finds himself back where he started: broke, hungry, and cold, willing to endure a mission for the night in hopes of getting “three hots and a flop.” As Casciato and West put it, “The immediacy of these bodily necessities makes *Waiting for Nothing* disturbing and powerful. Kromer’s book forcibly returns the typical reader to a primitive fight for existence” (279-80). The novel conveys the typical stiff’s experience of time through Kromer’s senses, without any progress and without any hope. The story is tied together through various episodes by the similarities between situations and by Kromer’s use of certain reoccurring phrases. He is always in search of “three hots and a flop” and willing to put up with those who take advantage of him because “it is warm in here, it is cold outside.”

In writing *Waiting for Nothing* in this way, Tom Kromer tries to make personal the stories of impersonal, anonymous strivers that ordinary Americans passed on the street every day in the worst years of the Depression. His present-tense, first-person narration puts the reader in the moment with Kromer, and that moment never changes. He is always back where he started: broke, hungry, and cold, as if no time has passed and no progress has been made. In this way, the reader also experiences the life of Kromer's strivers and gets an understanding of their world as it exists outside of and yet right in the midst of the reader's own. The destitute characters of Kromer's story could be anyone who has fallen on hard times, just as the author was once a college-educated young man with great potential until the advent of the Great Depression. There does not seem to be any difference in terms of background between Kromer and most of the ordinary people he hits up or "dings" for a handout. Neither does there seem to be much difference between Kromer the author, Kromer the narrator, and the people who would read his novel. The experience of being poor and homeless has changed Kromer into the Other in their eyes. His novel seeks to change that perception back to one of common human decency and respect for one another, though Kromer never quite experiences it in the story.

The style of *Waiting for Nothing* is crafted to bring the reader into an immediate and visceral communion with the narrator. Kromer's writing style is direct and powerful, written in present-tense with no background story and no definite ending. This is the same approach used by Meridel Le Sueur in her articles. The manipulation of tenses and narrative point-of-view are chosen for the very same reason. As it was with Le Sueur, the reader is thrown into the story, the world, the life of Tom Kromer, and experiences all the

low points (and very few high points) with him. William Solomon comments upon Kromer's technique in "Politics and Rhetoric in the Novel in the 1930s": "It is clear that his use of the present tense does lend a startling sense of immediacy to his work, giving the reader the (illusory) impression that he or she is with the narrator at the exact moment of each incident" (804). Aside from just being a technique to draw the reader into the story, Kromer's method enables him to promote social change as well. The reader is also given both good and bad models of charity through Kromer's own experiences. Through the characters and situations Kromer encounters, the reader comes to know what kinds of charity are truly working or truly effective, and which are merely shams or only given with ulterior motives. Just as Le Sueur promoted her communal sensibility in writing of her own gradual immersion into a collective action, Kromer sought to change his readers' attitudes and behavior. "*Waiting* seems to encourage the reader to respond to the narrative as a sincere appeal for sympathy, as a genuine cry for help by a human being caught in a truly dreadful predicament" (Solomon 805). Throughout the story, Kromer will continue to draw the reader in with his manipulation of language and narrative time.

The very first chapter sets the tone for the novel by presenting two contrasting views of charitable giving on a personal level. While begging for a handout at a restaurant, Kromer experiences the charity of two different strangers: one who buys him a big dinner and makes sure that everyone sees his generosity, and another who quietly slips him some money for a flop, but who does not want to get noticed by anyone but Kromer. The contrast between the two men can stand for the kinds of charity Kromer receives throughout the novel. There are those that want to be seen by the public as being very generous or otherwise exact a price for their giving, and those that just do what they

can because it is the right thing to do. When it comes to accepting such charity, Kromer is too desperate to be anything but grateful. It would not do to be anything other than appreciative or the charity might be withdrawn. The price of Kromer's steak dinner is not in dollars and cents, but in the perceived goodwill that the donor laps up from the other patrons. Kromer becomes a prop in the man's public performance of generosity. Kromer does not see it that way, because he is so hungry it does not matter if he loses a little dignity in return for a meal. "This is a good guy," he writes. "He orders my steak dinner in a loud voice so everyone can see how big-hearted he is, but he is a good guy anyway. Any guy is a good guy when he is going to buy me a steak dinner. Let him show off a little bit" (11). This kind of charity, where the stiff is expected to be humbly grateful for the handout and allow the giver to revel in the appreciation of the stiffs and the public, is the kind of charity that expects something in return because it did not have to be given in the first place. It is not really charity, but another form of transaction. The charity is given in return for the perceived recognition that the giver is a good person.

The other patron, in contrast, gives Kromer the seventy cents change from his own bill, but does not look for public recognition. Perhaps this is because he has been in Kromer's place and knows the price of public charity. "He speaks low. He is not trying to show off like this guy in the grey suit. . . . That guy is all right. I bet that guy has had troubles of his own some time. I bet he knows how it is to be hungry" (11-12). Kromer's story helps his readers to understand what it is to be hungry in order that they will seek to practice good charity. This second man, the one who gives without seeking attention, is set up here in the first chapter as the positive model of charity in the novel. His charity comes from having been down and out, from his recognition of the commonality between

himself and a fellow sufferer and human being. This man is the embodiment in Kromer's novel of the communal sensibility that Le Sueur's works also sought to promote. In showing the reader this episode of contrasting charitable forms right away in the novel, Kromer sets up the two men from the restaurant as archetypes for the two kinds of charity he experiences over and over in the story, and illustrates in simple terms what each kind is like.

The two men reappear in different guises throughout the novel. They are microcosms of the opposing types of charity that Kromer comes to know intimately. One is giving, sometimes grudgingly, perhaps even seeming generous at times, but the charity always comes with a price. It is the charity Kromer will experience in numerous mission breadlines and flophouses. It is the kind of charity that enables those who would prey on the downtrodden because the stiff has no other choice but to accept whatever terms the charity comes with. Then there is the other kind of charity, which gives what it can, though it is not much, without strings attached. This is the charity of the young prostitute Yvonne, a generous baker giving away a loaf of bread, or even of Tom Kromer himself. It is the kind of charity Kromer exemplifies best because despite all that he experiences in the novel he continues to cling to his humanity and the notion that stiff is deserving of dignity even in their lowest moments. "Kromer depicts a virtuous, moral protagonist who can never quite bring himself to hurt another and who maintains his generosity in the face of overwhelming cynicism" (Crawford 105). In depicting the charity of other characters, Kromer himself comes to know what true charity looks like, and through his own actions and attitudes he models it for the readers. Through these examples Kromer tries to shape

his reader into the becoming more like the second man, the one who gives because he knows it is the right thing to do for his fellow human beings.

Tom Kromer returns time and again to one of the iconic institutions of the Great Depression: the mission and its soup line. Kromer's critique of society and its assumptions about poverty are very scathing throughout the novel, but particularly in chapter three, which describes a night in a mission house. It is an indictment of charities run by religious groups seeking converts through coercion. When the poor are at their most vulnerable, they will be most willing to do anything for "three hots and a flop." Though the stew is made of rotten vegetables, and contains whatever might have fallen into the pot, including an overcoat button, the stiff still line up for the stuff because it is better than nothing. The beds are no better. The beds are hard. The blankets are dirty and full of lice. As bad as the food and beds are it is still supposed to be a charity. It still comes with a price. "You get no flop in this mission unless you listen to the sermon" (33).

Ironically, most of the stiff on the receiving end of this kind of charity are wise to the game, and the conversions are mostly insincere. Still, they must play along, pretending to save their souls if they are to receive even the poor hospitality of the mission. "We've seen too many stiff get kicked out in the cold because they didn't bow their heads. We are sick of this drivel this dame is handing out, but it is warm in here. It is cold outside" (35). Kromer uses that final phrase—"It is warm in here. It is cold outside"—throughout the chapter as a kind of refrain. It is one of many phrases Kromer repeats throughout the novel. Here this refrain is used to justify to himself and his readers why he is willing to suffer the indignity and even the hypocrisy of the mission. The

refrain also connects the moments, no matter how far apart they might be in the novel, when he invokes the same phrase. It reinforces the sense that Kromer lives in a continuous present. No matter where he is in the country, or how much time may have seemed to pass, the repeated phrases remind the reader of the realities within which Kromer must operate. In this case, he connects the events of various unpleasant missions, reminding the reader that a stiff will put up with a lot to get “three hots and a flop,” another refrain which ends the novel, in a mission once again, with no progress having been made.

While he goes through the motions, and says what he needs to say in order to get food and shelter, Kromer also undermines the notion that the missions are actually doing good works. Reading between the lines, the reader of *Waiting for Nothing* comes to understand that neither the stiffs nor the mission attendants are sincere in their roles. The stiffs will say and do what they have to, but they do it only out of desperation. The organizations running the missions are also going through the motions in order to promote themselves. In portraying the realities of the mission breadline and flophouse, Kromer lays bare the hypocrisy of their charity. The food is terrible, the beds full of lice, and the conversions are shams.

It may cost the stiffs nothing monetarily for the meals and a bed, but as the scene is played out nightly in missions across the country, the poor give up the only thing of value they have left—their dignity. More souls are likely lost through this chicanery than are saved. Kromer writes:

These stiffs are in this joint because they have no place to get in out of the cold, and this bastard asks them to stand up and tell what God has done for

them. I can tell him what God has done for them. He hasn't done a damn thing for them. I don't though. It is warm in here. It is cold outside. (39)

Even though Kromer does not speak up in the mission, to call them on their hypocrisy, he tells the readers through his narration of the event. The resigned tones he uses make it seem as if the character of Tom Kromer has gone through the conversion experience before, perhaps many times before as far as the reader knows, and he knows once again that it is empty hope only good now for getting a warm bed for the night. Kromer references the missions throughout the novel, always making them seem like a last resort for the desperate, before he finally ends the story in yet another mission.

At a cheap flophouse in chapter one, Kromer describes the “gas hounds,” stiffs who get high off of chemicals in order to forget their troubles. In the mission flophouse in chapter three, another stiff takes a more drastic way out of his situation: blowing his brains out in the mission bathroom. From the way the other stiff is behaving, Kromer knows what the man is planning to do before it occurs. He recognizes that state of despair when he sees it, having lived through it himself. “I know what he is thinking. I have walked like that myself. Up and down through the night. ‘She is a tough life, buddy,’ I say” (40). This is similar to the second man in the restaurant, who gives freely without looking for reward because he has been destitute once. In his own world-weary way, Kromer is trying to engage the other stiff in conversation, and possibly save his life as someone else did for him. The dedication for the novel reads, “To Jolene who turned off the gas.” This inscription implies that Kromer the author writes from real-life experience in this episode about suicide. This is a moment where Kromer’s past experience leads him to try to reach out briefly to another stiff. He feels a connection with the suicidal man

because he has tried it or thought about it himself. Here again, the distinction between Kromer the author and Kromer the character in the novel is blurred. It is also another example of Kromer modeling the attitudes and actions he wants to inspire in his readers. Do not just look the other way when you can help to save a life, especially if someone has once done the same for you. Unfortunately for Kromer, in this chapter his attempt to connect with the other stiff is unsuccessful. Kromer witnesses the aftermath of the suicide and is disgusted by what he sees, and it leads him to again contemplate a similar action.

In thinking about suicide, he eventually decides that is not necessarily a better end. He displays disgust at the suicide of the other stiff, but he also shows a certain amount of character to resist taking the easy way out for himself. Kromer's words to the reader are those of apathy and not strength, but the underlying message is that whatever excuse he tells himself for not going through with suicide, he is actually resilient in the face of overwhelming despair. It is another instance where Kromer himself demonstrates that though down on his luck, he is still not going to take the easy way out. He ends this chapter in the mission by resigning himself to the realities of his situation: "I pull off my clothes and crawl into bed" (42).

The final line of the chapter is another refrain, one that will occur again at the end of chapter four when Kromer resigns himself to another desperate situation in order to just have a place to sleep. The refrain connects the two degrading situations, comparing them to each other in the reader's mind. The submission to the charity of the mission soup kitchen and flophouse becomes one and the same with the submission to the attentions of Mrs. Carter in the next chapter. In this way Kromer shows these two

episodes of charity are the same in that they are both based upon exploiting the stiffes they supposedly benefit.

In chapter four of the novel, Tom Kromer essentially prostitutes himself to “Mrs. Carter,” a homosexual man who regularly picks up stiffes like Kromer in the park. In return for food and shelter for a while, Kromer sacrifices his dignity and his sexual identity. Is Mrs. Carter doing him a favor? Though Kromer is willing to submit to Mrs. Carter’s sexual advances, it is because he is so desperate and hungry. “These pansies give me the willies, but I have got to get myself a feed. I have not had a decent feed for a week” (44). Mrs. Carter’s charity is as self-serving as the missions, but the full extent of the price Kromer will have to pay is not apparent at first to the reader.

The full extent of that price, and all of chapter four, were also not apparent to readers of the first British edition of *Waiting for Nothing* as the entire chapter was taken out by the publisher. It was replaced by an explanation printed on blue paper stating that the substance of the chapter might have been “deemed unfit and improper” (Casciato and West 274). This deletion of an entire chapter, as well as the vague explanation that took its place on blue colored paper, essentially destroyed the effect of one of Kromer’s most telling episodes of predatory charity, the desperation that enabled it to occur, and the potent links to the previous chapter in the mission. That major change to the flow of the text, along with the addition of an unnecessary introduction by Theodore Dreiser and a short autobiography by Kromer himself, robbed British readers of the more powerful storytelling conveyed by the American (and subsequent British) editions of the novel by giving Kromer a past and a future beyond that contained in the eternal present-tense of the story.

As blatant as the chapter is in describing the transaction between Kromer and Mrs. Carter, the story of this episode is built upon in increments that build tension until the final lines. Though the reader is given the impression that Kromer knows what he is getting into, and has been in this situation before, it is for the readers' sake that Kromer writes, "A pansy like this, with his plucked eyebrows and his rouged lips, is like a snake to me. I am afraid of him. Why I am afraid of this fruit with his spindly legs and his flat chest, I do not know" (44). An astute reader already knows where this is going, and can explain Kromer's feelings of trepidation that way. It is not just homophobia, it is Kromer relating how he feels as he is about to be exploited once again in his need for food and shelter. Kromer does need to make it clear to his readers that he is not homosexual, since to be so would be outside the norms of ordinary society at the time, and he is always careful to portray himself as still worthy of acceptance by his fellow Americans. Despite his misgivings about the situation, Kromer is completely aware of what he has gotten himself into and what it will mean for him. Yet Kromer realizes his opportunity and even goes out of his way to secure a date with Mrs. Carter. "I am a lucky stiff running into this queer. For every queer there is a hundred stiffs trying to make him" (46). The need for food and shelter, however temporary, has driven him to this action. While making it plain that this is not a situation he would prefer, it is still one of his choosing because the kind of exploitative charity offered by Mrs. Carter is better than being hungry and cold.

The park where he is approached by Mrs. Carter is full of other stiffs who would be happy to trade places with him. Kromer is not the only one to have reached the conclusion that sexual preference is a luxury they do not have when they are hungry and homeless. What is more, there are numerous other homosexual men trying to pick them

up. It is a perfect venue for exploitation. Just as with the mission, exploiting the stiff's desperation in order to fulfill their own ends, men like Mrs. Carter are shown to be examples of abusive charity. "I am ashamed of all this. I am sick in the stomach, I am so ashamed of all this. What can I do? What I am doing is all I can do. A stiff has got to live" (51). Kromer's justifications to himself are reminiscent of his "It is warm in here. It is cold outside" refrain that he repeats in the various missions.

In an ironic twist, Mrs. Carter uses those same words in a slightly different order to convince Kromer to come to bed near the end of the chapter: "It is cold out there. It is nice and warm in here" (52). Since this is exactly the argument that Kromer himself would make in other unpleasant situations, the reader knows that this is yet another in a long line of humiliations that Kromer and other stiff's have to endure if they are to survive. "You can always depend on a stiff having to pay for what he gets. I pull of my clothes and crawl into bed" (53). With that final phrase, chapter four ends the same way that chapter three did. The two episodes are linked by the repetition of that exact phrase, and the reader is led to equate the so-called charity of the missions with the sexual exploitation by Mrs. Carter. Both take advantage of the men they profess to be saving. Kromer the author is calling them on it in his novel, but Kromer the narrator is resigned to enduring it for the sake of "three hots and a flop."

Why does Kromer include this episode in his novel? It is shocking enough to modern morality and to the standards of the 1930s as evidenced by the censorship of the British edition. It is shocking to modern standards not because homosexuality is as disapproved of today as it was then, but because of the obviously exploitative nature of Mrs. Carter's brand of charity. For that reason, and not the ingrained homophobia of

society then or now, this chapter is essential to understanding the message Kromer conveys to his reader. It is the heart of his novel to demonstrate that charity like this is not truly charity because it comes with a price. In this case, the price is meant to shock and outrage Kromer's readers, hopefully enough so that they will change things for the better.

Out on the streets there is little honor among thieves or even among stiffs. They too are more than willing to exploit one another for temporary advantage. Kromer is robbed by other stiffs while riding in a boxcar, and nearly killed one night in another. The challenge in the text is to see those horrible events contrasted with the times when collective or cooperative charity does occur. Moments of connection and mutual aid do take place in the novel, but they are always fleeting. Kromer may learn a new trick from a bum willing to sacrifice his dignity for a handout, or share the floor of a guy who has a cheap room for a time. Such episodes are the exception rather than the norm for Kromer. Even among stiffs who should work together there is still a sense of alienation instead of collaboration. Far too often there is a catch to any charity offered, like that of the missions or Mrs. Carter. The exceptions become even more notable for how they convey to the reader the genuine sense of cooperative charity that Kromer holds up as the ideal.

In chapter eight, Kromer meets a stiff who pulls a trick called the "Dummy-Chucker" in order to prey on the sympathies of women who will give him handouts. The stiff is willing to share his expertise, showing Kromer how best to make use of his meager ten cents in capital, but the cost would be more than just a dime. As the other stiff explains it, the scam works like this:

We blow this dough for two doughnuts, see? Then we hot-foot it to a corner where a bunch of dames is waitin' for a street-car. We plant one of these doughnuts on the curb and go across the street. When enough dames is waitin' there, I duck across the street, dive at this sinker, and down it like I ain't et for a week. Dames is soft, see. This racket is good for a buck and sometimes two bucks. (90)

As the stiff says, the scam is directed at women. Both he and Kromer know from experience that women are more likely to give money to a man who is down on his luck, and even more if they see he is so desperate that he is willing to dive at a doughnut lying on the sidewalk.

When it comes to charity, there is a big difference in the reactions of men and women. Kromer puts it this way: "Men are hard, but women are soft. A woman does not like to see a hungry stiff starve to death. A man does not care if a stiff starves to death" (91). Throughout the novel, Kromer has approached many people for handouts only to find that he is rejected for being a stiff, an outsider. He has better luck trying to ding a man who is accompanied by a woman.

Kromer's companion pulls the dummy-chucker scheme on a group of women, knowing exactly how to behave in order to maximize the pathos. Kromer describes the scene this way:

He shakes his head no, but he holds out his hand yes. This guy wants it to look as though it hurts his pride to take dough from this woman. I can see that this guy will never need to swill slop in a mission. If one person is going to be big-hearted, everybody wants to be big-hearted. Four or five of

these women fish around in their pocketbooks and walk over to this stiff who hides behind the post. (92)

That, of course, is right at the heart of Kromer's ongoing internal conflict. The other stiff has found a way to make sure he never has to submit to the watered-down charity of the missions or prostitute himself to the Mrs. Carters of the world. He will never have to resort to those sorts of indignities. He has thrown his dignity down on the street corner in front of a group of women and sacrificed his self-esteem in exchange for \$2.65 and a very nice doughnut.

As Kromer reflects on the episode, at the end of the chapter, he realizes the difference between himself and the other stiff. Kromer is still clinging to his sense of self-worth through all the tragedies and travesties to which life on the stem subjects him. Stiffs like the dummy-chucker artist illustrate that there are many who have, in fact, lost what dignity they once had. Through his story, Kromer gives his readers example after example of how even in the lowest points of their lives the stiffs like him are still worthy of respect, because they are trying to retain their dignity as best they can yet get treated as if they have none.

The encounter with this doughnut scam shows Kromer that there are still some lines he will not cross. He thinks to himself:

I sit here in this restaurant and think. Why can't I do what this stiff does? I have as much brains as he has. I have the imagination, too. But I cannot do it. It is the guts. I do not have the guts to dive down on a doughnut in front of a bunch of women. There is no use talking. I will never have the guts to do that. (93)

He has mentioned having guts before, when he was thinking about having the guts to blow his own brains out. In this way, Kromer is comparing the loss of dignity of having to prey on the sympathies of women to putting a bullet in his head. What seems at first like a comparatively lighthearted episode about the dummy-chucker doughnut diving scam becomes instead a brutal comparison between these two lines Kromer is unwilling to cross.

The lesson learned in the dummy-chucker encounter is that stiffs are also capable of exploiting the needs and sympathies of others. Though Kromer could use what he has learned and make his own life on the stem easier, he shows the reader that he chooses not to become that kind of bum. He has worked to portray himself as worthy of respect despite his destitution, and to that portrayal he remains consistent. To achieve this, he shows not only episodes of exploitative charity, but episodes of cooperative charity among stiffs.

One of the most memorable moments to convey a genuine feeling of communal sensibility between stiffs occurs in chapter seven when Kromer meets a fledgling prostitute named Yvonne. Though both are destitute, cold, and hungry, they pool their resources to make a crude beef stew on a cold Christmas Eve. This is the only episode in the novel that takes place at a distinctly identifiable time. It is in keeping with the nature of this episode that it occurs at that symbolically bright spot in the middle of winter. Even in the darkest moments, Kromer suggests, there are some occasions of hope. This is one of them for both Kromer and Yvonne.

Kromer shows Yvonne how to “penny-up” merchants as they gather the ingredients for their dinner. Though he has more, Kromer claims at each stop to only

have a few cents. He hopes that the shopkeepers will show a little charity, perhaps even more given that it is Christmas Eve. The varied reactions show the contrasting attitudes that stiffs like Kromer and Yvonne face. At the first stop a butcher tries to pawn off rotten baloney butts on Kromer when Kromer says he only has three cents to spare. However, the next stop at a bakery makes up for the parsimonious butcher when the baker gives Kromer a loaf of stale bread for free. Kromer's contrasting characterization of the butcher and the baker points out the major differences in each shopkeeper's approach toward charity. It is a reoccurrence of the scene from chapter one in the restaurant, when one man was generous only for a return, and another quietly gave what he could. These contrasts between the two forms of charity have already echoed throughout the text as separate instances of good and bad charity. They occur here paired together again to remind the reader through these two shopkeepers that it is not always the big acts of charity that mean the most.

In this chapter, the fat butcher has never known want and is unsympathetic to the stiffs. On the other hand, the baker must have known hard times herself and is therefore willing to part with a stale loaf of bread. He uses almost the exact same words to describe her generosity as he did the second man in the restaurant in chapter one. She gives because she has known hunger herself. She even seems to know what Kromer is doing in pennyning-up and tells him to save his money for other ingredients of the stew. He writes:

She hands me a stale loaf of bread. She does not reach out her hand for the two cents.

“Keep the two cents for the onion,” she says. “You can't make a decent stew without an onion.”

I can see that this woman is all right. I can see that she knows what it is to be hard up. She is not like that pot-bellied butcher. He is a bastard. (80)

In describing the butcher and the baker in this way, Kromer is making it clear that only those who have known hunger are truly sympathetic to others in that situation. Those that have money, like the butcher, are tightfisted. The ones who have not always had money, like the baker, are more likely to be generous. She is a model for the kinds of small charitable acts that cost little but mean much to a hungry stiff.

In much the same way, Kromer is willing to share his few resources with Yvonne. He has known the depths of desperation, cold, and hunger, and sees in her someone who needs his help. He cannot offer much, not in the way of money, but he can offer his experience and his sympathy. Though she initially approached Kromer as a potential client, they recognize in each other that they are only doing what they both have to do in order to survive. "I look at her. She looks at me. We are two people in the world. We are the same. We know that we are the same. Our gnawing bellies and our sleepy eyes have brought us together. We do not say any more. We do not need to" (82-83).

Yvonne's contribution to the meal is her room with a hot plate. Kromer notes that the bed is a double bed, and that the landlady must be mindful of the business that Yvonne is in. There is no judgment from Kromer throughout the chapter. How could there be when he has done much the same himself? Instead, Kromer says, "We understand each other. We like each other. I am not like this because I want to be. She is not like this because she wants to be" (83). Instead of the judgment they would get in the eyes of others, Kromer and Yvonne have found instead a brief moment of understanding and genuine humanity in each other. For a short while, Yvonne is saved from the kind of

exploitation Kromer experienced from Mrs. Carter. They are both able to have their dignity, as well as food and shelter, because of their collaborative effort.

Cooking dinner together lets them act for a short time as if they were not downtrodden on a cold Christmas Eve. They are able to act like ordinary human beings again instead of stiffs. The transformation, however temporary, has been achieved by the charitable actions of those who have next to nothing giving what little they have for their mutual benefit. There is a light at the end of the tunnel, and it is not an oncoming train. It is an all-too-brief moment of hope in the darkest parts of their lives. Kromer shows the reader that the most hopeless of situations can be reversed through the collective effort of people willing to make a difference for each other. Charity does not have to consist of big efforts because many small acts add up. It is the attitudes toward giving that have to be altered first. Seeing stiffs like Yvonne and Kromer as human beings worthy of dignity and aid—“we are the same”—is a step along the way toward achieving real change. This episode on Christmas Eve is a bright spot in the novel which shows the reader what is possible even in the coldest and darkest of times. Then, like the holiday on which this episode takes place, it is over and the narrative returns to the bleakness of a constant winter in Kromer’s life.

Chapter 12, the final chapter of the novel, takes place in yet another mission indistinguishable from the others. Though he has experienced many episodes that would rob him of his dignity and his morality, Kromer still clings to his sense of decency. It is part of what distinguishes him from many of the other stiffs he has encountered in countless missions, breadlines, and flophouses across the country. Over the course of the novel and all of the encounters he has had with positive and negative forms of charity,

Kromer himself has come to be the best example of the small acts of charity which he encourages his readers to take.

As with the suicide in the mission in chapter three, this episode in a mission also features the death of a stiff. This time the stiff in the bunk next to Kromer dies slowly while the other stiffs only complain about the noise the dying man makes. Knowing the stiff is beyond help, Kromer reflects on the experience and wonders if this will be his end as well. It is another instance of Kromer using his story to portray the stiffs like himself or the dying man as ordinary Americans who deserve better. He realizes that even in a room full of people it is still possible to be alone, even to die alone. Kromer is not just referring to one poor stiff dying in a mission, he is using the man to stand for all the stiffs dying in all the missions, or on the streets, or on the rails. He is using that moment to sum up all the experiences he has had while trying to eek out a living on the edges, ignored and abandoned. Kromer's whole story has been one of trying to make the invisible "forgotten man" visible again to the rest of society. He thinks to himself:

This stiff has not always been a stiff. Somewhere, some time, this stiff has had a home. Maybe he had a family. Where are they now? I do not know. The chances are he does not know himself. He is alone. The fritz has made him alone. He will die alone. He will die cooped up in a mission with a thousand stiffs who snore through the night, but he will die alone. The electric light outside will go on and off in the dark, "Jesus Saves," but that will not help this stiff. He will die alone. (125)

Despite the apparent futility of the situation, Kromer tries to get the mission stiffs to summon assistance for the dying man. He knows it is too late, and he knows that no one

else cares. He tries anyway. Even at this late point in the novel Kromer demonstrates that he has not lost the fundamental sense of decency that he has struggled to hold on to the entire time. He has sacrificed his dignity in every way possible by this time, but he still cannot watch another man die without trying to help.

Perhaps it is not just decency that compels him to try to summon help, but the realization that the dying stiff could just as well be him. That thought crosses the minds of the other stiffs as the dying man is carried out. Kromer the narrator comes to the realization as he tells it in his constant now of the novel. Kromer the author has been leading up to this for an entire novel. It is a moment that connects the dying stiff, a truly forgotten man, to all the other forgotten men surrounding him in the mission. In the space of a paragraph, Kromer uses this event to transition through three different narrative modes. Just as Meridel Le Sueur manipulated narrative point-of-view to achieve the effect of drawing her readers into the action, so Kromer uses the same techniques to illustrate the epiphany of communal sensibility he experiences in this episode. He starts in third person, talking about the other stiffs, switches to second-person, and ends in the third-person plural “we.” The death of another man, just like themselves, allows the stiffs to identify first with the dying man and then with each other in a brief moment of shared realization. As readers are tied into Kromer’s usually first-person narration, they are now also partakers in this moment of unity. Kromer writes:

They think that the stiff on the stretcher they hear thumping down the stairs is not the stiff that is on it, but themselves. They can see themselves lying on this stretcher. [. . .] That is the way they will land up. They know that that is the way. You cannot forever be eating slop and freezing to

death at night. Some night you will not be able to get your breath for the rattle, and they will come and carry you out on a stretcher. We stare wide-eyed at the shadows that play across the ceiling. We watch the flickerings of the sign outside that says: "Jesus Saves." (128)

In this moment of death in the crowded mission, Kromer and the other stiff have achieved the transcendent feeling of communal sensibility that marks the climax of Meridel Le Sueur's "I Was Marching." Both events involve mass participation in a moment of shared realization that we are all part of one community. What affects one affects all. Through his manipulation of narrative mode, Kromer brings readers to the same realization.

It is unclear whether the episodes involving missions are taking place in the same mission in the same city or in completely different ones in cities throughout the nation. It does not matter. In making them so interchangeable that they may as well be the same, Kromer points out that the ubiquitous missions are all running the same racket. They claim to be helping the poor by dishing out bad food and providing lousy bedding while trying to win converts. Their charity is shown to be fake, even predatory in their own way, and heaped with hypocrisy with regard to the values they profess. Though Kromer and the other stiff complain, they return time after time because the alternatives are often worse. It is little different, and no less degrading than sleeping with Mrs. Carter or any of the other indignities he is forced to endure to obtain his three hots and a flop.

When Kromer is able to seem like a normal human being again, when he does experience moments approaching genuine charity given freely and with no strings attached, hope returns to his otherwise dismal existence. That charity never comes from

the “organized charities” like the missions or the government. The only kindnesses experienced by Kromer come from individual men and women who have decided to make a difference. The second man in the restaurant in chapter one is just the first example, followed by Yvonne and the baker in chapter seven, and ultimately Tom Kromer himself. In showing his experiences this way, Kromer makes it plain to his readers and appeals once more to their sense that stiff is just ordinary people—though down on their luck—and that other ordinary people like them can make the difference in helping them out. The rugged individual of the past is replaced by the community of individuals lending a hand to restore dignity and hope to the forgotten men and women of the Great Depression.

Conclusion

The works of Meridel Le Sueur and Tom Kromer illustrate the evolving attitudes of Americans toward giving and receiving charity. The large-scale charity of the missions or local government contrasts with the small-scale charities of neighbors helping one another in their time of need. Those charitable organizations or individuals who gave with strings attached are shown to be ultimately selfish in nature, while the truest charity comes from those who have themselves known hunger. The challenge during the Depression years was to transform the American mindset into one that could see the poor as fellow Americans worthy of respect and not as failures deserving of only scorn. The old mythology of rugged individualism was being actively rewritten, and a new mythology was being created in its place. Le Sueur and Kromer contributed their work to this revision of the American mindset through their writings in the Great Depression.

The work of Le Sueur and Kromer to alter American perceptions of charity and those receiving it would find a larger audience in John Steinbeck's 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. While traveling around the migrant camps and gathering information, John Steinbeck experienced the life of the migrant worker, much as Tom Kromer and Meridel Le Sueur lived the lives they describe in their own works. Steinbeck's novel is not limited to his source material as he explores the relationships between people as individuals, as part of groups and collectives, and as a society. Steinbeck's style for this novel, alternating broad strokes of history and impersonal economic forces with the human-scale story of the Joad family, attempts to show the effects of those impersonal forces on the ordinary human beings caught up in them. Steinbeck wants the reader to

understand not only the big picture, but also to sympathize with the real-life Joads and the efforts going on at the time to help them. *The Grapes of Wrath* illustrates once again that those big economic forces, government bureaucracies, and associations of large landowners are impersonal and uncaring, while charity is most effective when it is personal or understood on a personal level. The final act of Steinbeck's novel, Rose of Sharon giving her own milk to a starving stranger, is the ultimate expression of the personal and selfless charity that Le Sueur and Kromer work toward in their own earlier writings.

Though the Joads are fictional, they represent the experience of many real Americans just trying to survive the Depression, bewildered that the world does not actually have the sense of decency they were brought up to believe it had, and still trying to maintain their basic human dignity against situations that strip them of that dignity one small step at a time. They are once proud people now looked down upon for their status as economic refugees. There are few instances in their lives of the exploitative charity found in Kromer's novel, but there are numerous examples of other forms of charity, both individual acts by kind-hearted strangers and collective acts in migrant camps. The Joads are briefly able to enjoy the benefits of living in a WPA-constructed workers camp. The contrast between the Hoovervilles and the other migrant camps shows what is possible when people work together to get each other through the tough times.

These literary works reflect the political change that had swept the nation out of the old attitudes and into the New Deal. Under Roosevelt's New Deal government alternatives were created to provide relief, and they were good ones at that. Federal projects like the WPA and its many subsidiaries provided real relief to those hit hardest

by the Great Depression. Relief was not given in the form of handouts, or accompanied by a list of humiliating questions; it came in the form of jobs. They may not have been glamorous jobs, or even high paying jobs. The rewards were not meant to be financial, but moral. This too played on a residual sentiment of rugged individualism because it made those receiving assistance feel that they were truly earning it through their work and not through their state of utter failure. The New Deal challenged the underlying assumptions of poverty by taking the opposite approach than that of other charities.

Instead of handouts which often robbed the recipient of dignity, the WPA, CCC, and other programs gave back dignity itself, and with it the means to earn a living honestly. This philosophy is the same as that of the “communal sensibility” of Meridel Le Sueur, the stiffs in the hobo jungle with Tom Kromer, and the migrant camps visited by the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath*, only written on a nationwide rather than a neighborhood scale. Those involved with it understood, they lived in poverty or around it, and they knew that the rampant crime and degradation of societal values feared by the rich is caused by want and desperation more than anything else. They tried to cure the disease, not apply a band-aid to a symptom as organized charities did. Had they been allowed to continue, a great good may have resulted, changing the face of America forever afterward.

The very success of the WPA, its government camps, and collective efforts among the poor were the reasons for their downfall. While providing what was most desperately needed—jobs, dignity, and real hope—these efforts created in the wealthy class a feeling of panic. Such collective efforts were identical to communism as far as the rich were concerned, and they feared what would happen if a collective spirit should

sweep the nation. For this reason, the migrant camps were undermined, harassed, and even burned as in *The Grapes of Wrath*. So-called “red agitators” were arrested, and Congress was persuaded to kill the funding of the WPA. How could those in power—the wealthy, Congress, religious groups rounding up converts—know the true nature of the problem when they had not experienced poverty themselves? They could not. They responded out of fear that control was being taken from them. It was an instinctive reaction to a potential loss of power, and to that ever-present boogey-man of capitalism: the communist. In the end, no collective effort could be allowed to get so large as to make the rich and powerful fear that the revolution was at hand.

The tragedy of the Great Depression is that it was a lost opportunity to put right the numerous social wrongs which had led to it in the first place. An emphasis on community rather than individual achievement began to take hold among those who had been forced out of the traditional American rugged individual paradigm. Instead of wealth trickling down to the masses, morality might have trickled up to the elite, but it was not to be. The spirit of collectivism was arrested, imprisoned, or crushed wherever it could be found, and ignored where it could not be. As the nation moved from depression into wartime and then postwar prosperity, the struggles of the Thirties were romanticized, as all our history tends to be, in order to fit the idea that the country pulled itself up by the bootstraps through the heroic and patriotic efforts of its citizens.

The attitudes that led to the Depression are still with us. Once more in recent memory everyone was told that “greed is good” and it seemed as if everyone was making a fortune on the stock market, the dot-com boom, or the housing boom. When the boom became a bust, it was called “a recession” and jobs became scarce again. This time

instead of massive government programs like the WPA to put people to work, the government bailed out the very corporations that caused the crisis in the first place. Rather than exercising their power to alleviate the effects of the recession, politics have paralyzed governments. Federal and state governments have cut back on spending instead, leaving local governments and individuals to fend for themselves. Even charities are having difficulty, as people give less money to them in order to save it for themselves. Granted, this is not nearly as bad a situation as the Great Depression, but as it is often said, those who fail to learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat its mistakes.

If the Great Depression should have taught us any lesson, it is that we are stronger as a society together than individually trying to claw our way to the top of the social pile. Our real heroes should be the unified masses of Meridel Le Sueur, Tom Kromer and Yvonne, Rose of Sharon and the rest of John Steinbeck's Joad family, and especially the communities to which they belong. They represent the true spirit of America, making their best effort to stay alive in a desperate situation, and sticking together in the face of adversity.

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