

WORDS OF AGES EXERCISE: "WOMEN ON THE BREADLINES," BY MERIDEL LESUEUR

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INTRODUCTION

In 1932, the American author and activist Meridel LeSueur wrote "Women on the Breadlines," a blend of reporting and narration that documented the experience of unemployed women during the Great Depression. In this *Words of Ages* exercise, we present an excerpt of "Women on the Breadlines," connect it to the enduring debate over the creation of a social safety net, and challenge you to consider to what extent the government should work to ensure the economic security of its citizens.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Meridel LeSueur (1900–1996)

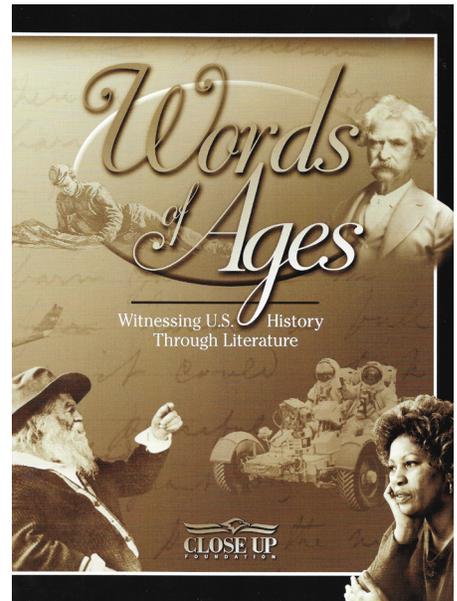


Born to politically active parents in Iowa, Meridel LeSueur made a long career of writing short stories, novels, and articles, many of them with a feminist or socialist slant. She began writing fiction in the 1920s, while she acted in Hollywood silent films. In the 1930s, LeSueur became active in the labor movement and other liberal causes. Today, she is regarded as an astute chronicler of women's problems and achievements.

By 1932, the Great Depression had brought terrible suffering to millions of Americans. The mood of the country—particularly in cities, where unemployment and hunger had hit hardest—was one of absolute despair. Unable to pay their rent or mortgage premiums, thousands were evicted from their homes. Many homeless families built shacks along the outskirts of large cities. Approximately three million of the 13 million unemployed Americans were women. Men often left their families in search of work, and women needed to find jobs.

Disillusioned with President Herbert Hoover's inability to improve the economy, voters in November 1932 elected Franklin D. Roosevelt on his platform to institute a "New Deal." At the center of the New Deal was a belief that the federal government should go to greater lengths to protect the needy and promote the public good.

About that time, LeSueur began writing articles that documented the lives of poverty-stricken Americans in the Midwest. She and other liberal activists described what they saw as the worst effects of the capitalist system—financial inequality, exploitation of workers, and the plight of women and minorities. They relayed their stories in the form of "reportage," a new literary genre. A type of biased journalism, reportage used a three-dimensional narrative style intended to help readers see, feel, and experience the event. Borrowing characteristics from short stories, reportage features strong characterization and heightened detail for persuasive effect. "Women on the Breadlines" is LeSueur's first work of reportage. It appeared in the communist journal *The New Masses* in 1932.



WOMEN ON THE BREADLINES

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. There are no jobs. Most of us have had no breakfast. Some have had scant rations for over a year. Hunger makes a human being lapse into a state of lethargy, especially city hunger. Is there any place else in the world where a human being is supposed to go hungry amidst plenty without an outcry, without protest, where only the boldest steal or kill for bread, and the timid crawl the streets, hunger like the beak of a terrible bird at the vitals?

We sit looking at the floor. No one dares think of the coming winter. There are only a few more days of summer. Everyone is anxious to get work to lay up something for that long siege of bitter cold. But 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 king of humiliation in it. We look away from each other. ...

So we sit hour after hour, day after day, waiting for a job to come in. There are many women for a single job. A thin sharp woman sits inside a wire cage looking at a book. For four hours we have watched her looking at that book. She has a hard little eye. In the small bare room there are half a dozen women sitting on the benches waiting. ...

This is a domestic employment bureau. Most of the women who come here are middle-aged, some have families, some have raised their families and are now alone, some have men who are out of work. Hard times and the man leaves to hunt for work. He doesn't find it. He drifts on. The woman probably doesn't hear from him for a long time. She expects it. She isn't surprised. She struggles alone to feed the many mouths. Sometimes she gets help from the charities. ... If she's proud then she starves silently, leaving her children to find work, coming home after a day's searching to wrestle with her house, her children.

Some such story is written on the faces of all these women. ...

A girl we have seen every day all summer went crazy yesterday at the Y.W. She went into hysterics, stamping her feet and screaming.

She hadn't had work for eight months. "You've got to give me something," she kept saying. The woman in charge flew into a rage that probably came from days and days of suffering on her part, because she is unable to give jobs, having none. She flew into a rage at the girl and there they were facing each other in a rage both

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helpless, helpless. This woman told me once that she could hardly bear the suffering she saw, hardly hear it, that she couldn't eat sometimes and had nightmares at night.

So they stood there, the two women, in a rage, the girl weeping and the woman shouting at her. In the eight months of unemployment she had gotten ragged, and the woman was shouting that she would not send her out like that. "Why don't you shine your shoes?" she kept scolding the girl, and the girl kept sobbing and sobbing because she was starving. ...

Sitting here waiting for a job, the women have been talking in low voices about the girl Ellen. They talk in low voices with not too much pity for her, unable to see through the mist of their own torment. "What happened to Ellen?" one of them asks. She knows the answer already. We all know it.

A young girl who went around with Ellen tells about seeing her last evening back of a café downtown, outside the kitchen door, kicking, showing her legs so that the cook came out and gave her some food and some men gathered in the alley and threw small coin on the ground for a look at her legs. And the girl says enviously that Ellen had a swell breakfast and treated her to one too, that cost two dollars. ...

"I guess she'll go on the street now," a thin woman says faintly, and no one takes the trouble to comment further. Like every commodity now the body is difficult to sell and the girls say you're lucky if you get fifty cents.

It's very difficult and humiliating to sell one's body.

Perhaps it would make clear if one were to imagine having to go out on the street to sell, say, one's overcoat. Suppose you have to sell your coat so you can have breakfast and a place to sleep, say, for fifty cents. You decide to sell your only coat. You take it off and put it on your arm. The street, that has before been just a street, now becomes a mart, something entirely different. You must approach someone now and admit you are destitute and are now selling your clothes, your most intimate possessions. Everyone will watch you talking to the stranger showing him your overcoat, what a good coat it is. People will stop and watch curiously. You will be quite naked on the street. It is even harder to try to sell one's self, more humiliating. It is even humiliating to try to sell one's labor. When there is no buyer.

WORDS OF AGES: QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Keeping in mind the excerpt from “Women on the Breadlines,” read the first half of the [Current Issues Policy Unit: Work and Economic Security](#) to learn about the debate over the role of government in creating a social safety net. Then, using the information from the policy unit or your own independent research, answer the following questions.

Take a look at the excerpt from “Women on the Breadlines” and select a quote or passage that you believe best expresses the effects of extreme poverty. Why did you choose this particular passage?

Think about the economic conditions that existed during the Great Depression and the economic conditions that exist today. How are they different? Are there ways in which they are similar?

Outline two specific social safety net policies that the government has implemented since the early days of the Great Depression. What are the potential benefits and drawbacks of these programs?

Do you support or oppose the creation of the programs you listed? Do you support their continued use? Explain your reasoning.

Is it the responsibility of government to ensure that every American has a basic level of economic security? Why or why not?
