

Assessing with Primary Sources

Grade Level(s): 11-12

Standard(s) or Objectives: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text.

Library of Congress Resources:



“I’d Rather not be on Relief” by Lester Hunter (1938)

https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc1985001.afc1985001_st045/?st=gallery

Topic Background:

The Great Depression and the Dustbowl shaped the culture of the 1930s in the United States. Though many families needed assistance during this time, many were embarrassed to seek aid.

Excerpted from:

<http://drought.unl.edu/DroughtBasics/DustBowl/TheGreatDepression.aspx>

Source(s) Used:

The source used for this assessment is a song written by Lester Hunter. It reflects on the Dustbowl migrant (worker’s) experience during the Great Depression. The song was written in 1938.

Answer Key:

Students should explain that author means that it is disgraceful to accept government relief, even when lacking food.

Directions: Read Lester Hunger’s song below and answer the question that follows.

“I’d Rather not be on Relief” (By Lester Hunger (1938))

We go around all dressed in rags
While the rest of the world goes neat,
And we have to be satisfied
With half enough to eat.
We have to live in lean-tos,
Or else we live in a tent,
For when we buy our bread and beans
There’s nothing left for rent.

I’d rather not be on the rolls of relief,
Or work on the W.P.A
We’d rather work for the farmer
If the farmer could raise the pay;
Then the farmer could plant more cotton
And he’d get more money for spuds.
Instead of wearing patches,
We’d dress up in new duds.

From the east and west and north and south
Like a swarm of bees we come;
{ The migratory workers
Are worse off than a bum.
We go to Mr. Farmer
And ask him what he’ll pay;
He says, “You gypsy workers
Can live on a buck a day.”

{ I’d rather not be on the rolls of relief,
Or work on the W.P.A
We’d rather work for the farmer
If the farmer could raise the pay;
Then the farmer could plant more cotton
And he’d get more money for spuds.
Instead of wearing patches,
We’d dress up in new duds.

We don’t ask for luxuries
Or even a feather bed,
But we’re bound to raise the dickens
While our families are underfed.
Now the winter is on us
And the cotton picking is done,
What are we going to live on
While we’re waiting for spuds to come?

Now if you will excuse me
I’ll bring my song to an end.
I’ve got to go and chuck a crack
Where the howling wind comes in.
The times are going to better
And I guess you’d like to know –
I’ll tell you all about it,
I’ve joined the C.I.O.

Question: What does the author mean when he says “I’d rather not be on the rolls of relief or work on the W.P.A” on the top right? (CCSS.RH.11-12.4)
