

American Literature Readings 7



READER RESPONSE

Directions: Answer the following questions on the lines below.

1. What rivers does the poet say he has known?

2. Why are the rivers mentioned in the poem significant?

3. What does the poet mean when he states he has "known rivers"?

4. **CRITICAL THINKING** Who is named in the poem? What is the significance of that person to the poet?

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"#38" from *The People, Yes* Carl Sandburg

About the Selection Carl Sandburg (1878–1967) has been called the Poet of the People. He finished the eighth grade and then went to work at various manual labor jobs before becoming a hobo—an experience that deepened his insight into economic and class disparity. In the early 1900s, he adopted socialist views of politics and began organizing and educating on behalf of the worker. In 1919, as a reporter for the *Chicago Daily News*, he wrote a series, later published in book form, about the race riots of 1919. His poems reflect the best and the worst of America.

GUIDED READING

As you read, imagine that you are living during the 1930s, when millions of people are out of work and confidence in the future has plummeted. Then answer the questions that follow.

Have you seen men handed refusals
till they begin to laugh
at the notion of ever landing a job again—
Muttering with the laugh,
"It's driving me nuts and the family too,"
Mumbling of hoodoos and jinx,
fear of defeat creeping in their vitals—
Have you never seen this?
or do you kid yourself
with the fond soothing syrup of four words
"Some folks won't work"??
Of course some folks won't work—
they are sick or wornout or lazy
or misled with the big idea
the idle poor should imitate the idle rich.

Have you seen women and kids
step out and hustle for the family
some in night life on the streets
some fighting other women and kids
for the leavings of fruit and vegetable markets
or searching alleys and garbage dumps for scraps?

Have you seen them with savings gone
furniture and keepsakes pawned
and the pawntickets blown away in cold winds?
by one letdown and another ending
in what you might call slums—
To be named perhaps in case reports
and tabulated and classified
among those who have crossed over
from the employables into the unemployables?
What is the saga of the employables?
what are the breaks they get?
What are the dramas of personal fate
spilled over from industrial transitions?
what punishments handed bottom people
who have wronged no man's house
or things or person?

Stocks are property, yes.
Bonds are property, yes.
Machines, land, buildings, are property, yes.
A job is property,
no, nix, nah nah.