

The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze

William Saroyan



ABOUT THE READING Saroyan's story is about a young man who is starving and looking for work during the Great Depression. As he goes out to make the rounds of employment agencies and department stores, the words of a song go through his head: "He flies through the air with the greatest of ease; the daring young man on the flying trapeze."



*As you read the passage below, notice the things that seem important to this young man as he sets out to find work. The following words may be new to you: **superficial, fop, unostentatiously, inorganic.** You may want to use a dictionary to look them up.*

He walked into the day as alertly as might be, making a definite noise with his heels, perceiving with his eyes the **superficial** truth of streets and structures, the trivial truth of reality. Helplessly his mind sang, *He flies through the air with the greatest of ease; the daring young man on the flying trapeze;* then laughed with all the might of his being. It was really a splendid morning: gray, cold, and cheerless, a morning for inward vigor; ah, Edgar Guest, he said, how I long for your music.

In the gutter he saw a coin which proved to be a penny dated 1923, and placing it in the palm of his hand he examined it closely, remembering that year and thinking of Lincoln, whose profile was stamped upon the coin. There was almost nothing a man could do with a penny. I will purchase a motor-car, he thought. I will dress myself in the fashion of a **fop** . . . drink and dine, and then return to the quiet. Or I will drop the coin into a slot and weigh myself . . .

He remembered how greatly he needed food. Every meal was bread and coffee and cigarettes, and now he had no more bread. Coffee without bread could never honestly serve as supper, and there were no weeds in the park that could be cooked as spinach is cooked.

If the truth were known, he was half starved, and there was still no end of books he ought to read before he died. He remembered the young Italian in a Brooklyn hospital, a small sick clerk named Mollica, who had said desperately, I would like to see California once before I die. And he thought earnestly, I ought at least to read *Hamlet* once again; or perhaps *Huckleberry Finn*.

It was then that he became thoroughly awake: at the thought of dying. Now wakefulness was a state in the nature of a sustained shock. A young

man could perish rather **unostentatiously**, he thought; and already he was very nearly starved. Water and prose were fine, they filled much **inorganic** space, but they were inadequate. If there were only some work he might do for money, some trivial labor in the name of commerce. If they would only allow him to sit at a desk all day and add trade figures, subtract and multiply and divide, then perhaps he would not die. He would buy food, all sorts of it: untasted delicacies from Norway, Italy, and France; all manner of beef, lamb, fish, cheese; grapes, figs, pears, apples, melons, which he would worship when he had satisfied his hunger. He would place a bunch of red grapes on a dish beside two black figs, a large yellow pear, and a green apple. He would hold a cut melon to his nostrils for hours. He would buy great brown loaves of French bread, vegetables of all sorts, meat; life.

From a hill he saw the city standing majestically in the east, great towers, dense with his kind, and there he was suddenly outside of it all, almost definitely certain that he should never gain admittance, almost positive that somehow he had ventured upon the wrong earth, or perhaps into the wrong age, and now a young man of twenty-two was to be permanently ejected from it. This thought was not saddening. He said to himself, sometime soon I must write *An Application for Permission to Live*. He accepted the thought of dying without pity for himself or for man, believing that he would at least sleep another night. His rent for another day was paid; there was yet another tomorrow. And after that he might go where other homeless men went. He might even visit the Salvation Army—sing to God and Jesus (unlover of my soul), be saved, eat and sleep. But he knew that he would not. His life was a private life. He did not wish to destroy this fact. Any other alternative would be better.

Through the air on the flying trapeze, his mind hummed. Amusing it was, astoundingly funny. A trapeze to God, or to nothing, a flying trapeze to some sort of eternity; he prayed objectively for strength to make the flight with grace.

ANALYZING LITERATURE

- Main Idea** What is the young man in the story in desperate need of, and what does he fear might happen to him if he does not get it?
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- Critical Thinking: Analysis** In the last paragraph, a swing on the trapeze is a metaphor for what? How else might swinging on the trapeze be good metaphor for this young man in his present circumstances?
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A Fireside Chat with Franklin Roosevelt



ABOUT THE SOURCE Franklin Roosevelt was inaugurated as president in March 1933. In his first hundred days in office, Roosevelt pressed Congress to pass a host of new bills to help revive the economy. This legislation marked the start of the New Deal. Many Americans at this time were fearful that the Depression would continue. President Roosevelt gave radio addresses to reassure the people that better days were ahead. In the address below, Roosevelt describes the basics of his recovery program.



*As you read, note the specific ideas that shape Roosevelt's plan for economic recovery. The following word may be new to you: **assimilate**. You may want to use a dictionary to look it up.*

First, I think that we all wanted the opportunity of a little quiet thought to examine and **assimilate** in a mental picture the crowding events of the hundred days which had been devoted to starting the wheels of the New Deal . . .

I think it will interest you if I set forth the fundamentals of this planning for national recovery; and this I am very certain will make it abundantly clear to you that all of the proposals and all of the legislation since the fourth day of March have not been just a collection of haphazard schemes but rather the orderly component parts of a connected and logical whole . . .

First, the Farm Act: It is based on the fact that the purchasing power of nearly half our population depends on adequate prices for farm products. We have been producing more of some crops than we consume or can sell in a depressed world market. The cure is not to produce so much. Without our help the farmers cannot get together and cut production, and the Farm Bill gives them a method of bringing their production down to a reasonable level and of obtaining reasonable prices for their crops. I have clearly stated that this method is in a sense experimental, but so far as we have gone we have reason to believe that it will produce good results.

It is obvious that if we can greatly increase the purchasing power of the tens of millions of our people who make a living from farming and the distribution of farm crops, we will greatly increase the consumption of those goods which are turned out by industry . . .

If all employers in each competitive group agree to pay their workers the same wages—reasonable wages—and require the same hours—reasonable hours—then higher wages and shorter hours will hurt no employer. Moreover, such action is better for the employer than unemployment and

The New Deal**Primary Source**

low wages, because it makes more buyers for his product. That is the simple idea which is the very heart of the Industrial Recovery Act . . .

We are not going through another winter like the last. I doubt if ever any people so bravely and cheerfully endured a season half so bitter. We cannot ask America to continue to face such needless hardships. It is time for courageous action, and the Recovery Bill gives us the means to conquer unemployment with exactly the same weapon that we have used to strike down Child Labor . . .

If I am asked whether the American people will pull themselves out of this depression, I answer, "They will if they want to." The essence of the plan is a universal limitation of hours of work per week for any individual by common consent, and a universal payment of wages above a minimum, also by common consent. I cannot guarantee the success of this nationwide plan, but the people of this country can guarantee its success. I have no faith in "cure-alls" but I believe that we can greatly influence economic forces . . . I do have faith, and retain faith, in the strength of common purpose, and in the strength of unified action taken by the American people.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

July 24, 1933

Source: Franklin Roosevelt, "Radio Address from the White House," July 24, 1933

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. What was the basic idea behind Roosevelt's plan for recovery?

2. What did Roosevelt say he needed for his plan to work?

3. What feelings did Roosevelt try to inspire in his listeners? Give examples to support your answer.

CWA Workers Building a Road in California



ABOUT THE SOURCE The Great Depression created a severe unemployment problem in the United States. By the start of 1933, thirteen million Americans were without jobs. In November of that year, President Roosevelt issued an executive order creating the Civil Works Administration. The CWA provided jobs to more than four million Americans during the winter of 1933–1934. This photograph of CWA workers was taken in San Francisco.



As you look, pay special attention to the details that you can make out.



Courtesy of Franklin D. Roosevelt
Presidential Library and Museum

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Look closely at the type of clothing that some of the men (such as the one farthest to the right) are wearing. What does this type of attire suggest about at least some of the men employed by the CWA?

2. What are two positive developments that can be seen in the photo?

3. What are some possible reasons that the men are working with wheelbarrows instead of more sophisticated construction equipment?
