

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself” Franklin D. Roosevelt once famously said. He said this during his inaugural speech during the Great Depression trying to uplift citizens' spirits and keep them optimistic through the rough times. This quote is able to describe many common themes throughout the book “Growing Up”. This book follows a once young boy named Russel and his family who experienced many of the effects of the Great Depression like economic struggle and family struggles.

Due to the Great Depression and his family not having much money, Russel along with his mom and siblings are forced to go and live with his uncle just for a couple of months until the Great Depression is over and everything goes back like it was. The family along with the rest of America try and remain optimistic but as the years go on and they are still stuck in the same living and financial situations, they begin to lose hope. Also over the years of trying to survive the Great Depression, he meets many of his other family members who are also struggling financially. “With Uncle Hal’s commanding manner toward hired help and his impressive mustache and his fortune in lumber laying in the downstairs hallway, it was like having Daddy Warbucks come for a visit” (Baker, 130). This quote showcases many different themes that are prevalent throughout the book, the first one being the lack of job opportunities. Russel is having to sleep in a cramped house with his mother, younger sister, his uncle, and his aunt, then a strange man appears at the front door step with workers and beautiful lumber. In that time, anyone with any form of income was praised because the rest of America was struggling to even make enough money to put food on the table for just themselves. Baker makes it very apparent that his Uncle Hal’s behavior is praised by referring to him as “Daddy Warbucks”. Daddy Warbucks is a fictional character who was a rich businessman and adopted an orphan named “Annie”. After adopting Annie, he takes her to live in his mansion and live a wonderful life getting everything she ever wanted. So by Uncle Hal having a decent income that lets him hire help to aid him in his business, the family is treating him like royalty. It seems as if their mindset is, if they treat him good enough, he will give them a portion of his income or let them work for him. Also anyone who was considered to be rich during the Great Depression seemed to get away with things that those who weren’t considered rich couldn’t. I believe that if Uncle Hal was not rich, he wouldn’t have been able to have so much authority over the black workers or to the family. An example of his special treatment happens when he is first greeted at the door, ““Jesus,

Mary, and Joseph!’ she cried to the others... ‘Let’s make a pot of coffee!’” (Baker, 130).

Throughout the book Aunt Pat uses the phrase “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph” a lot, but usually it is only when something happens that has a major effect on her mood. For example, when the landlady who is also their neighbor, had a portrait of the former President Herbert Hoover hanging by her front door. This angered Aunt Pat because she felt that President Hoover was at fault for the recession that they were in. Showing that when Aunt Pat was greeted by Uncle Hal, it had a positive effect on her mood. This is also seen when she insists on making coffee because Russell notes that they only make coffee when some type of major event occurs. Given that Uncle Hal already was the older sibling and looked up to, he is already given special treatment but I think that the family tries to put more effort into giving him the special treatment when they see that he has money. An example of him showing his authority happens twice back to back. The first time he was talking to his hired help, “Turning to the black men who stood silently at the door, he shouted, ‘Don’t just stand there! Bring those boards in here and put ‘em on the floor!’... ‘Leave any scratches on them and I’ll sue you for every cent that you’re worth...’” (Baker, 130). After Uncle Hal said these things, nobody told him off or told him to watch his tone, they just let it happen. This is because everyone in the room already had some form of envy for him due to the fact he had enough money to not starve at night. This is also due to the unspoken power balance there was, since Uncle Hal had more money than the rest of his family and he was the oldest, he held some form of authority.

Due to the economic struggle of the Great Depression, many people had to pick up odd jobs, one of them being Russel’s Uncle, Allen having to sell oleomargarine to make money in order to support his family. While his uncle was selling oleomargarine, he met a man named Oluf who was forty years old and emigrated to the United States after his wife passed away. He considered himself to have a successful American story because he went from working with baked ovens, to having freshly manicured nails, wearing pressed suits, traveling city to city and doing business deals with bankers. He also borrowed from the banks to buy three of his houses. “He was a man of high good humor, well-pressed, double-breasted suits, manicured nails, and glossily polished shoes. He had risen above the labor of bake ovens, traveled from city to city, talked business deals with bankers.” (Baker, 100). This was taking place during the beginning of the Great Depression so some people still had a good sum of money depending on if they put it in the banks or not. This is also begins to show how different everyone’s time was during the

Recession, Uncle Hal started off with a successful business that turned into him laying on Aunt Pat's couch everyday, Russel's mother lost her husband and could barely afford to take care of her children and was forced to move in with her older brother, and Oluf seems to be living quite a successful life. This aspect of him draws Russell's mother in because she has an opportunistic mindset. Although she means well and starts to develop real feelings for Oluf, when she originally meets him, the first thing that she thinks about is how his money is going to help her and her family. Since Oluf was considered to be successful he spent much of his time traveling which meant that his time spent with Elizabeth [Russell's mother], was short lived. He begins writing her two to three notes every week documenting how his life was going and how much he missed Elizabeth, but as the weeks go on he starts experiencing the worst of the Depression himself. On May 9th, 1932 he wrote, "... he told me ... i will have to go June first. Business is so bad and getting worse... he let four salesmen go here..." (Baker, 100). Elizabeth cared not only about Oluf, but his potential worth. She was willing to not see him and write notes to him every week, if that meant that in a couple of months they could be living in a mansion together. But as time went on the Depression didn't miss one person. Although everyone's experience with the Depression was different, there are a lot of similarities and that is job loss/the inability to find work. This is seen with Oluf and his other colleagues getting fired, this is seen with Russell having to pick up inconsistent odd jobs to provide money for his family, and it is seen with Elizabeth and her career. Pre-Depression Elizabeth was a school teacher and she loved her job, so when she moved to New Jersey to live with her brother she hoped to resume teaching but was unable to do so. "She hoped to resume teaching. The school administrators told her Virginia credentials were no good in New Jersey and no jobs were... available even if she did qualify... Department stores were firing, not hiring." (Baker, 98). During this time period women had very strict roles when it came to work. Women took jobs in factories, the education system and department stores, while men took jobs related to business and that had more power. Due to this norm there weren't many options for women, seeing that all of their options were now not taking any more help. Businesses couldn't afford to do all of the work by themselves because they would never be able to keep up with the supply and demand, but they also couldn't afford to hire any help because they had no money coming in because the rest of America had no money because the banks put it in stocks. No one could help each other even if they tried and this repeating cycle was not benefiting anyone.

Russell's mother tried her best to remain optimistic not just for her children but for her own mental wellbeing. She had been saving and telling herself for over a year now that she was going to save enough money to leave her brother's house and build a house just for her and her kids to live in and no one else. That goal seemed to be the only thing that motivated her because she knew that she and her kids deserved more. Overtime, living with her brother's Hal, Charlie and Allen and her sister-in-law Pat, they all begin becoming restless and tired of each other. All of them are ready to move out and get away from each other. Uncle Hal takes his wishes to the extreme and begins trying to move everyone out one by one. He originally starts with Uncle Charlie and fails, so he decides to capitalize on his sister, Elizabeth's dreams by selling her a fake dream in order to get money. "Uncle Hal designed a plan to catch my mother's fancy. She would move Doris, me, and Uncle Charlie to Baltimore... Uncle Hal would go to Richmond and set up his company funded by her capital... she reasoned, he could probably make do with \$75." (Baker, 170). This quote shows that due to Uncle Hal's authority from being the oldest child, he is trying to make plans for everyone else's life. The only problem with that is his plans are not genuine. His main goal is to get rid of Uncle Charlie because he can't stand him due to his laziness, so he is banking on his sisters dreams of wanting to live in Baltimore where she used to live as a child by taking her money and promising her a house. His plan starts off as him starting the company, then making her an associate and moving herself, her children, and her brother Charlie out of his life for good. But as time goes on while he's away, he begins to realize that making a living during these times is a lot harder than expected. "He was terribly pinched for money. Didn't have the full \$75 to send her..." (Baker, 172). This quote first shows how the mother's optimism keeps letting her down. She had optimism that the recession would only last a couple of months, she had optimism that her and her boyfriend would see each other again and she had optimism that her brother wouldn't let her down. It wasn't even that he just let her down, he also took \$75 from her with the promise of her getting it back and she never did. This also shows how money hungry everyone is during this time Uncle Hal stopped caring about his family and was only worried about his own financial wellbeing to the point that he was willing to take from family. I could imagine that this was a common theme all over America, when people are in time of need they will do just about anything to get what they need.

When the book begins, the reader is met by the present Russell who is taking care of his mother, who has dementia. Due to her dementia, her memory will often regress and she will

recount memories during the Depression and throughout her life that really make Russell think back on his actions. "As I hovered over my mother's bed listening to muffled signals from her childhood, I realized... when she was young, with life ahead of her, I had been her future and resented it." (Baker,14). This opens up the main theme of the family struggles. During this part, it is post-Depression and is now realizing why his mother pushed him so hard to be something of himself and how he wished he didn't take that time for granted because now he'll never get to get that back. Russell also recounts when was younger and first lost his father. It happened so suddenly, as a kid he was unable to comprehend the magnitude of his father passing and having to go live with his uncle because of it. "...my mother was told that he had died at 4:00 a:m in 'acute diabetic coma.'" (Baker, 80). At this point in the book, the biggest struggle that Russel has had to face so far is the ongoing power feud that is taking place between his mother and grandmother. His father passing away opens the door to the future events that happen. When Russell's father passed, Elizabeth "was left with a few dollars of insurance money, a worthless Model T, several chairs, a table to eat from, a couple of mail-order beds, a crib, three small children, no way to earn a living, and no prospects for the future." (Baker, 84). This shows that due to Russell's father's death it already puts him and his family behind financially, with barely enough money to eat. This also further shows how different the struggles were for everyone during the Recession and Great Depression. Not everyone lost a parent during the Recession, and was torn from everything they know. Everyone had similar experiences that were all traumatic in their own ways, but no one had the exact same experience. His fathers death also led his mother to give up his sister. Their family's household went from being dual income to now just barely one before moving, so Elizabeth did not see a way that she would have been able to afford to take care of all three children and herself financially. "The giving up of Audrey was done at a time of shock and depression for her." (Baker, 84). This quote shows that due to Elizabeth's husband's death, it shocked her mentally, physically and emotionally, meaning she could not make sound decisions. In that moment in time, she thought that giving up her child was the only right option there was to survive the Recession. Looking back on it, it was her biggest regret but it goes to show how big of an effect the Depression had on some people. A mother's bond with their child is so strong and to have to make the choice to give your child up is not an easy one.

Overall, many families living in America had similar experiences during the Great Depression. But there were very distinct differences between each person. No one person had the same experience as someone else. “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself” Franklin D. Roosevelt once famously said. He said this during his inaugural speech during the Great Depression trying to uplift citizens' spirits and keep them optimistic through the rough times. This quote is able to describe many common themes throughout the book “Growing Up”. This book follows a once young boy named Russel and his family who experienced many of the effects of the Great Depression like economic struggle and family struggles.