



OwlTeacher
Teaching with Movies & Literature

THE JOURNEY OF NATTY GANN

Good for the following school subjects:

- ✓ American History
- ✓ The Great Depression

Directed by Jeremy Kagan
1985; Rated PG; Family/Adventure; 101 minutes; Color;
Available from www.OwlTeacher.com bookstore

Synopsis: This movie is set during the Great Depression and follows a young girl's solitary journey in search of her father, who has left her in the care of their landlady, to find work in the Pacific Northwest. Jumping the rails and risking her life, Natty is determined to travel across the country to find her dad and become reunited with him.

Educational Benefits of this movie: Those studying the Great Depression will gain an awareness of the plight that people faced at this time. The father in this film is out of work and struggling to raise his young daughter. He ultimately finds work as a logger in the mountains of the Pacific Northwest, but must leave his daughter behind in the care of a seemingly kind lady. The young girl decides to jump trains all the way to California to reunite with her father. "Riding the rails" is something that many teenagers did during the Great Depression, so this movie would add to overall learning. It also shows how the Great Depression was felt through the eyes of a young girl which is a welcome change from other films about the Great Depression.

Historical Background: At the height of the Great Depression, two hundred and fifty thousand teenage hoboes were roaming America. The reasons why these young adults left home are varied. Some left home because they felt they were a burden to their families, other were escaping homes that had been crushed by the shame of unemployment and poverty, and still other kids left because they wanted to experience the adventure of a life time. Whatever the reasons, they took off in search of a better life and employment opportunities. Some left with the blessing of their parents, others went against their parents' wishes, and there were those who ran away without saying good bye to anyone. These teenagers faced hardships including the danger of jumping the trains, capture by police, hunger, illness, and exposure to the elements. Nonetheless, the young generation of this era learned self-reliance, compassion, frugality, and a love of freedom and country. These "hoboes" are a permanent mark on the tapestry of American History.

Study Questions:

1. Choose one theme that you believe this film embodied. Explain why you think this is the theme and give examples from the movie to justify your answer.
2. How was Natty Gann similar AND different from the teenagers we have studied in American History?

3. How did this movie help you to understand what people went through during the Great Depression?
4. Which events in the film reinforced your understanding and study of the teenagers who rode the rails? Give examples from the movie.
5. What did you like best about the movie? Why?
6. What did you like least about the movie? Why?
7. Who was your favorite character in the movie? Why?
8. Do you think that Natty's father should have taken her with him when he left for California? What were the reasons he didn't take her?
9. Why do you think Natty trusted the teenage boy she meets along the way?
10. What did the wolf-dog in the movie represent to Natty?
11. Do you like how the movie ended? Why or why not? If not, how would you have ended the film?

Project:

Arrange to go to a local senior citizen center and talk with the people there. Ask to interview them about their experiences and memories during the Great Depression. Make sure to ask them if they or anyone they knew ever rode the rails during that time. Students may focus on interviewing one person only or they can pose a series of questions to a group of senior citizens. Compile your data into a visual display with a catchy title. Ask to take photos of the interviewees and place the photos along with their quotes, testimonies, and other images of the Great Depression. Students should present their primary source project to their classmates. It might even be a good idea to give your presentation to the Senior Citizen Center as a gift!