

Study Guide: *Of Mice and Men*

Of Mice and Men is the poignant story of two migrant workers trying to make their way through the aftermath of drought and depression in 1930s America. Caught in a world of grinding work and little promise, George and Lennie are driven by a dream of one day owning some land of their own. Lennie, though a big bulk of a man, has a mental disability that renders him a child-like character with little understanding of the world. George, as his guardian and companion, delicately balances both responsibilities while maintaining a tenuous connection between Lennie's world and reality. John Steinbeck takes us through the inevitable conflict between Lennie's naiveté and the harsh, unforgiving circumstances of the real world, to reveal some indelible truths about friendship, survival and compassion.

About the Author

John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California in 1902 to a family of modest means. He grew up in rural California, working as a ranch hand during his teen years. At the age of 17, he enrolled at Stanford University but had little academic success and failed to graduate. In 1925 he began writing as a journalist and later, as a caretaker of a Lake Tahoe estate, he turned his attention to writing novels. His first novel, ***Cup of Gold***, was published in 1929, the year of the stock market crash that preceded the Great Depression. In 1935, he published *Tortilla Flat* and began to be recognized as a serious writer. His crowning work, ***The Grapes of Wrath***, won him the Pulitzer Prize in 1940. After a stint in Europe during WWII, Steinbeck returned to America and worked as a screenwriter and filmmaker in Hollywood through the 1940s and 50s. He received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962. He died in 1968 in New York City.

In ***Of Mice and Men***, published in 1937, Steinbeck returns to his birthplace of Salinas and to the experiences and people of his youth in rural California. As in many of his novels, Steinbeck explores the lives of people who are tied to the land and the hardships and injustices they faced. Steinbeck was involved with politics throughout his life and that interest appears time and again in his work through his commentary on the social and economic circumstances of his country that allow for the exploitation of its weaker and less advantaged citizens.

The Great Depression

On October 24, 1929, the stock market crashed (Panic of 1929), leading to the deepest economic depression the nation had ever known. It lasted until 1939, when World War II broke out in Europe. The causes of the Depression were several, including loss of foreign markets, a farm depression that cut farm purchasing power, and lack of buying power for most people. The problems were compounded by a six year drought that turned America's fertile farmlands into a dust bowl. The effects were also several, including – business bankruptcies, bank closings, factory shutdowns, farm foreclosures, and massive unemployment (1 out of 4 workers in 1933).