

Social and Economic Background To The Story

The story takes place in California against a background of unemployment. It is set in the period of the Great Depression which lasted from 1930 to the outbreak of the 2nd World War in 1939. During that time, industry and banks collapsed. People were left without money for food, clothes and rent. Millions of people were left jobless and homeless.

Things were bad in the towns but were worse in the country. Farmers had to leave their land. Drought had caused their crops to fail, therefore farmers could not repay their bank loans. The bank dispossessed the farmers and their families, leaving them homeless. Many of these people went west to California where they dreamt of owning a piece of land and "living off the fatta the lan".

Steinbeck illustrates the plight of these people through the suffering of his main characters Lennie and George. He makes them dream of owning a piece of land and living off its produce. They draw other characters into their dream, giving them hope for a short time even though these are tragically dashed.

George and Lennie are more than characters in a story. They are symbols of the thirst for land of millions of dispossessed white Americans who dreamt of being in control of their own lives. Unfortunately, very few realised their dreams. The Californians were afraid of being swamped by them and drove many away by force. Those who were brave enough to stay were put into refugee camps in the California valleys. Steinbeck gathered material for his books from visits to these camps.

Reality

John Steinbeck wanted to bring our attention to the kind of conditions under which people lived, including:

unemployment
poverty
isolation
homelessness
sexism
racism
disability
ageism
oppression

Each character in "Of Mice and Men" suffers from one or more of these, except perhaps the boss and his son Curley. Tick the appropriate boxes in the grid as you read to show how the characters suffer from each condition.

	George	Lennie	Candy	Crooks	Curley	Curley's wife
unemployment						
poverty						
isolation						
homelessness						
sexism						
racism						
disability						
ageism						
oppression						

Look at the results. Who do you think is the best and the worst off?