

**A LETTER SENT FROM JOHN STEINBECK THE AUTHOR OF 'OF MICE AND MEN' TO AN ACTRESS
PLAYING CURLEY'S WIFE ABOUT THE BACKSTORY OF HER CHARACTER**

To Claire Luce

Los Gatos [1938]

Dear Miss Luce,

Annie Laurie says you are worried about your playing of the part of Curley's wife although from the reviews it appears that you are playing it marvelously. I am deeply grateful to you and to the others in the cast for your feeling about the play. You have surely made it much more than it was by such a feeling.

About the girl--I don't know of course what you think about her, but perhaps if I should tell you a little about her as I know her, it might clear your feeling about her. She grew up in an atmosphere of fighting and suspicion. Quite early she learned that she must never trust anyone but she was never able to carry out what she learned. A natural trustfulness broke through constantly and every time it did, she got her. her moral training was most rigid. She was told over and over that she must remain a virgin because that was the only way she could get a husband. This was harped on so often that it became a fixation. It would have been impossible to seduce her. She had only that one thing to sell and she knew it.

Now, she was trained by threat not only at home but by other kids. And any show of fear or weakness brought an instant persecution. She learned to be hard to cover her fright. And automatically she became hardest when she was most frightened. She is a nice, kind girl, not a floozy. No man has ever considered her as anything except a girl to try to make. She has never talked to a man except in the sexual fencing conversation. she is not highly sexed particularly but knows instinctively that if she is to be noticed at all, it will be because some one finds her sexually desirable.

As to her actual sexual life--she has had none except with Curley and there has probably been no consummation there since Curley would not consider her gratification and would probably be suspicious if she had any. Consequently she is a little starved. She knows utterly nothing about sex except the mass misinformation girls tell one another. If anyone--a man or woman--ever gave her a break--treated her like a person-- she would be a slave to that person. Her craving for contact is immense but she, with her background, is incapable of conceiving any contact without some sexual context. With all this--if you knew her, if you could ever break down a thousand little defenses she has built up, you would find a nice person, an honest person, and you would end up by loving her. But such a thing could never happen.

I hope you won't think I'm preaching. I've known this girl and I'm just trying to tell you what she is like. She is afraid of everyone in the world. You've known girls like that, haven't you? You can see them in Central Park on a hot night. They travel in groups for protection. They pretend to be wise and hard and voluptuous.

I have a feeling that you know all this and that you are doing all this. Please forgive me if I seem to intrude on your job. I don't intend to and I am only writing this because Annie Laurie said you wondered about the girl. It's a devil of a hard part. I am very happy that you have it.

Sincerely,

John Steinbeck

THE DUST BOWL HIT AMERICA IN THE EARLY 1930s AND MADE FARMING VERY DIFFICULT:

Dust Bowl

The Dust Bowl was the name given to the drought-stricken Southern Plains region of the United States, which suffered severe dust storms during a dry period in the 1930s. As high winds and choking dust swept the region from Texas to Nebraska, people and livestock were killed and crops failed across the entire region. The Dust Bowl intensified the crushing economic impacts of the Great Depression and drove many farming families on a desperate migration in search of work and better living conditions.

Rising wheat prices in the 1910s and 1920s and increased demand for wheat from Europe during World War I encouraged farmers to plow up millions of acres of native grassland to plant wheat, corn and other row crops. But as the United States entered the Great Depression, wheat prices plummeted. Farmers tore up even more grassland in an attempt to harvest a bumper crop and break even.

Crops began to fail with the onset of drought in 1931, exposing the bare, over-plowed farmland. Without deep-rooted prairie grasses to hold the soil in place, it began to blow away. Eroding soil led to massive dust storms and economic devastation—especially in the Southern Plains.

The Dust Bowl, also known as “the Dirty Thirties,” started in 1930 and lasted for about a decade, but its long-term economic impacts on the region lingered much longer.

Severe drought hit the Midwest and Southern Great Plains in 1930. Massive dust storms began in 1931. A series of drought years followed, further exacerbating the environmental disaster.

By 1934, an estimated 35 million acres of formerly cultivated land had been rendered useless for farming, while another 125 million acres—an area roughly three-quarters the size of Texas—was rapidly losing its topsoil.

Regular rainfall returned to the region by the end of 1939, bringing the Dust Bowl years to a close. The economic effects, however, persisted. Population declines in the worst-hit counties—where the agricultural value of the land failed to recover—continued well into the 1950s.

During the Dust Bowl period, severe dust storms, often called “black blizzards” swept the Great Plains. Some of these carried Great Plains topsoil as far east as Washington, D.C. and New York City, and coated ships in the Atlantic Ocean with dust.

Billowing clouds of dust would darken the sky, sometimes for days at a time. In many places, the dust drifted like snow and residents had to clear it with shovels. Dust worked its way through the cracks of even well-sealed homes, leaving a coating on food, skin and furniture.

Some people developed “dust pneumonia” and experienced chest pain and difficulty breathing. It’s unclear exactly how many people may have died from the condition. Estimates range from hundreds to several thousand people.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE WALL STREET CRASH IN AMERICA:

The strength of America's economy in the 1920's came to a sudden end in October 1929 – even if the signs of problems had existed before the Wall Street Crash. Suddenly the 'glamour' of the Jazz Age and gangsters disappeared and America was faced with a major crisis that was to impact countries as far away as Weimar Germany – a nation that had built up her economy on American loans.

The huge wealth that appeared to exist in America in the 1920's was at least partly an illusion.

For example the African Americans and the farmers had not benefited in the Jazz Age but neither had 60% of the whole population as it is estimated that a family needed a basic minimum of \$2,000 a year to live (about £440) and 60% of US families earned less than this. Almost certainly some of the 60% included those who had gambled some money on Wall Street and could least afford to lose it in the crash of October '29.

The very rich lost money on Wall Street but they could just about afford it. But the vast bulk could not afford any loss of money. This had a very important economic impact as these people could no longer afford to spend money and therefore did not buy consumer products. Therefore as there was no buying, shops went bust and factories had no reason to employ people who were making products that were not being sold. Therefore unemployment became a major issue. The Great Depression took a while to get going but by the winter of 1932 it was at its worst.

The impact of the Wall Street Crash:

- 1) 12 million people out of work
- 2) 12,000 people being made unemployed every day
- 3) 20,000 companies had gone bankrupt
- 4) 1616 banks had gone bankrupt
- 5) 1 farmer in 20 evicted
- 6) 23,000 people committed suicide in one year – the highest ever

There was no system of benefit for the unemployed. Charities such as the Salvation Army gave out free food and shelter. It is known that some people actually starved to death. In some states men deliberately set fire to forests to get temporary employment as fire fighters while farmers killed their animals as no-one could afford to buy them in the cities despite there being great hunger there.

What did the government do?

The president was a Republican, Herbert Hoover. He believed that if you were in trouble you should help yourself and not expect others to help you. This he called "rugged individualism". Therefore he did not do a great deal to help those out of work.

Hoover did not believe that the depression would last – "Prosperity is just around the corner" is what he said to businessmen in 1932 when things were just about at their worst. Squalid cardboard campsites were created in cities to live in...called "Hoovervilles". The nick-name of the soup given out by charities for the unemployed was "Hoover stew".

However, Hoover did do some good. Money was used to create jobs to build things such as the Hoover Dam. In 1932 he gave \$300 million to the states to help the unemployed (Emergency Relief

and Reconstruction Act) but it had little impact as states run by the Republicans believed in “rugged individualism” more than Hoover did and they used only \$30 million of the money offered to them.

Many saw Hoover’s attempts as being “too little too late”.

In the November 1932 election, Hoover was heavily defeated by the Democrat candidate. This man had promised the American public a “New Deal”. His name was Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Thirteen years of Republican rule had come to an end.

PLOT SUMMARY OF 'GRAPES OF WRATH' – ANOTHER FAMOUS NOVEL BY JOHN STEINBECK

Plot Overview

Released from an Oklahoma state prison after serving four years for a manslaughter conviction, Tom Joad makes his way back to his family's farm in Oklahoma. He meets Jim Casy, a former preacher who has given up his calling out of a belief that all life is holy—even the parts that are typically thought to be sinful—and that sacredness consists simply in endeavoring to be an equal among the people. Jim accompanies Tom to his home, only to find it—and all the surrounding farms—deserted. Muley Graves, an old neighbor, wanders by and tells the men that everyone has been “tractored” off the land. Most families, he says, including his own, have headed to California to look for work. The next morning, Tom and Jim set out for Tom's Uncle John's, where Muley assures them they will find the Joad clan. Upon arrival, Tom finds Ma and Pa Joad packing up the family's few possessions. Having seen handbills advertising fruit-picking jobs in California, they envision the trip to California as their only hope of getting their lives back on track.

The journey to California in a rickety used truck is long and arduous. Grampa Joad, a feisty old man who complains bitterly that he does not want to leave his land, dies on the road shortly after the family's departure. Dilapidated cars and trucks, loaded down with scrappy possessions, clog Highway 66: it seems the entire country is in flight to the Promised Land of California. The Joads meet Ivy and Sairy Wilson, a couple plagued with car trouble, and invite them to travel with the family. Sairy Wilson is sick and, near the California border, becomes unable to continue the journey.

As the Joads near California, they hear ominous rumors of a depleted job market. One migrant tells Pa that 20,000 people show up for every 800 jobs and that his own children have starved to death. Although the Joads press on, their first days in California prove tragic, as Granma Joad dies. The remaining family members move from one squalid camp to the next, looking in vain for work, struggling to find food, and trying desperately to hold their family together. Noah, the oldest of the Joad children, soon abandons the family, as does Connie, a young dreamer who is married to Tom's pregnant sister, Rose of Sharon.

The Joads meet with much hostility in California. The camps are overcrowded and full of starving migrants, who are often nasty to each other. The locals are fearful and angry at the flood of newcomers, whom they derisively label “Okies.” Work is almost impossible to find or pays such a meager wage that a family's full day's work cannot buy a decent meal. Fearing an uprising, the large landowners do everything in their power to keep the migrants poor and dependent. While staying in a ramshackle camp known as a “Hooverville,” Tom and several men get into a heated argument with a deputy sheriff over whether workers should organize into a union. When the argument turns violent, Jim Casy knocks the sheriff unconscious and is arrested. Police officers arrive and announce their intention to burn the Hooverville to the ground.

A government-run camp proves much more hospitable to the Joads, and the family soon finds many friends and a bit of work. However, one day, while working at a pipe-laying job, Tom learns that the police are planning to stage a riot in the camp, which will allow them to shut down the facilities. By alerting and organizing the men in the camp, Tom helps to defuse the danger. Still, as pleasant as life in the government camp is, the Joads cannot survive without steady work, and they have to move on. They find employment picking fruit, but soon learn that they are earning a decent wage only because they have been hired to break a workers' strike. Tom runs into Jim Casy who, after being released from jail, has begun organizing workers; in the process, Casy has made many enemies

among the landowners. When the police hunt him down and kill him in Tom's presence, Tom retaliates and kills a police officer.

Tom goes into hiding, while the family moves into a boxcar on a cotton farm. One day, Ruthie, the youngest Joad daughter, reveals to a girl in the camp that her brother has killed two men and is hiding nearby. Fearing for his safety, Ma Joad finds Tom and sends him away. Tom heads off to fulfill Jim's task of organizing the migrant workers. The end of the cotton season means the end of work, and word sweeps across the land that there are no jobs to be had for three months. Rains set in and flood the land. Rose of Sharon gives birth to a stillborn child, and Ma, desperate to get her family to safety from the floods, leads them to a dry barn not far away. Here, they find a young boy kneeling over his father, who is slowly starving to death. He has not eaten for days, giving whatever food he had to his son. Realizing that Rose of Sharon is now producing milk, Ma sends the others outside, so that her daughter can nurse the dying man.

American Dream of the 1930's

During the 1930's, the ideal American Dream consisted of three criteria: two children, a marriage, and a three-bedroom house with the infamous white picket fence. The American Dream rose to its greatest fame during the 1930's as a result of the on-going Great Depression from 1929 to 1939. Thousands of Americans were going through tough times and looked up to the American Dream as a goal to achieve and strive for. The American Dream also lured millions of immigrants annually into the relatively new nation, further worsening the low employment rates and increasing poverty. At the beginning of the 1930's, one quarter of all wage-earning workers were unemployed, approximately 15 million Americans. During the 1930's, another one of the parts to the ideal American Dream was the ability to feed one's family. The Dust Bowl occurred throughout the 30's, forcing farmers in the midwest to move and contributing to the rising unemployment.

Novels

O'Pioneer by Willa Cather

- The novel recounts the life of Alexandra Bergson and her experiences during the Great Depression. Alexandra's perseverance, stubbornness, and faith in the land permits her to survive the Great Depression. The rest of the novel focuses on the events preceding the return of her friends and family to the land she tended for throughout the economic turmoil.

The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald

- Narrator, Nick Carraway, recounts the life of neighbor James Gatsby and his endeavors to win the love of his life, Daisy, from her husband Tom. Throughout the novel, Nick navigates and succumbs to the captivating and deceitful world Gatsby and the rest live in. The relation between this novel and the American Dream is continued in subsequent pages.

Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck

- The novel is about two migrant workers from California, George Milton and Lennie Small, who are traveling around California, hoping to find their own piece of land to settle on. The two embark on a journey to find new work, after being forced to flee from Lennie's problems in the previous town. To some extent, George is Lennie's guardian and looks after him throughout the journey.

Contemporary Reception of *Of Mice and Men* in 1930s America:

Published in 1937, *Of Mice and Men* is remembered as one of Steinbeck's most important and influential novels. Chronicling a few days in the lonely lives of two migrant workers, George Milton and Lennie Small, *Of Mice and Men* shows the devastating impact that the Great Depression had on many American's ability to succeed financially. Like Steinbeck's other work written during the Great Depression, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), *Of Mice and Men* comments on the elusiveness of the American Dream and the false hope of material prosperity that is often dangled in front of the lower and middle classes. Steinbeck took the title of his novel from a line in Robert Burns' poem "To a Mouse": "The best laid schemes o' mice and men/ Gang aft a-gley/ An' leave us naught but grief an' pain/ For promised joy" (Burns). According to critic Michael Meyer, writing for the modern *Literary Encyclopedia*, Steinbeck "especially liked the parallels suggested by the poem's story-line which depicts the random destruction of a mouse's home by a plow." Meyer further asserts that Steinbeck felt that there were striking similarities between "the fate of the mouse and humanity [. . .] that human efforts and dreams for the unattainable are ultimately as futile as a rodent trying to protect his home from the more powerful blade of a plow." The near impossibility of attaining the American Dream in the face of huge and random challenges, like natural and economic disasters, became the central theme of Steinbeck's novel.

As Megan Chaudet points out in "20th Century American Best Sellers," many of the contemporary reviews of *Of Mice and Men* "were extremely positive and considered the new novel well up to par with [Steinbeck's] previous novels." The novel was also highly anticipated, selling "117, 000 copies[. . .] in advance of the official publication date, February 25, 1937" (Meyer). It was also a selection for the book of the month club. Biographer Jackson Benson reports the novel "[...] hit the best-seller lists almost immediately. Both Hollywood and Broadway were quick to see the novel's dramatic possibilities" (351). Hollywood began pressuring Steinbeck for a screenplay and the first stage production of the novel was underway right after the text was published (Benson 351). According to a 1937 review by the *New Republic*, *Of Mice and Men* "[...] has that common denominator of most good imaginative writing, a shadow of the action that means something beyond the action" (qtd. in Chaudet). Furthermore, the *New Republic* states, "[t]he book is well contrived and effectively compressed, driving ahead with straight and rapid movements, as magnificently written as Steinbeck's other four California novels" (qtd. in Chaudet). Many reviewers lauded Steinbeck's ability to make such a poignant and important statement about humanity and its persistent struggle to rise above its own shortcomings in so brief a text. James Brown of the *Saturday Review of Literature* wrote in 1937, "The story is simple but superb in its understatements, its realisms which are used not to illustrate behavior, but for character and situation" (qtd. in Chaudet). Tom Cameron of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote in 1939 that *Of Mice and Men* is a quintessential example of the "vividly striking realities with intellectual patterns" that characterize Steinbeck's best work, which he argues was lost upon Steinbeck's move to New York in 1939 (qtd. in Fensch 18).

While overall the reception of *Of Mice and Men* was overwhelmingly positive, staunch debunker of Steinbeck, Edmund Wilson, criticized the novel for "Steinbeck's preoccupation with biology," which "led him 'to present life in animal terms'" (Meyer). He saw *Of Mice and Men* as a simple social representation of Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest. Lennie must die as he represents the weak in society who are unfit for survival. An early review in *The Book Review Digest* expressed a similar sentiment accusing Steinbeck of creating characters who are incapable of thinking rationally for themselves: "it is rather that each of them follows some instinct as a bull follows the chain which runs through a hole in his nose, or as a crab moves toward its prey" (qtd. in Chaudet). Some critics were disappointed that Steinbeck did not give his audience the typical happy ending customary for

literary underdog characters like George and Lennie. Steinbeck instead chose to show the realities of life and the flippancy of fate through Lennie's death and George's loss.

Though there has been some negative criticism of the novel over the last 70 years, and it has been both censored and banned for its use of offensive language, *Of Mice and Men* is "still considered influential internationally" finding great success in Japan and the United Kingdom in particular (Chaudet). It has been translated into numerous languages and is still enormously popular in the United States. Like many of Steinbeck's works, *Of Mice and Men* has the unique ability to capture an important period in American history while containing values that transcend specific time frames and cultures. Moreover, the characters in *Of Mice and Men* show a difficult truth about loneliness and an unreachable dream--something that most people, no matter their nationality or social station, can identify with.

JOHN STEINBECK BIOGRAPHY:

John Steinbeck was an American novelist whose Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, portrayed the plight of migrant workers during the Great Depression.

Who Was John Steinbeck?

John Ernst Steinbeck Jr. (February 27, 1902 to December 20, 1968) was a Nobel and Pulitzer Prize-winning American novelist and the author of *Of Mice and Men*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden*. Steinbeck dropped out of college and worked as a manual laborer before achieving success as a writer. His works often dealt with social and economic issues. His 1939 novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, about the migration of a family from the Oklahoma Dust Bowl to California, won a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award. Steinbeck served as a war correspondent during World War II, and he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962.

John Steinbeck

John Steinbeck's Books

John Steinbeck wrote 31 books over the course of his career. His most well-known novels include *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and *East of Eden* (1952).

'The Pearl' (1947)

This story, based on a Mexican folktale, explores human nature and the potential of love. Kino, a poor diver who gathers pearls from the ocean floor, lives with his wife Juana and their infant son Coyotito by the sea. On the same day Coyotito is stung by a scorpion and is turned away by the town doctor because they can't afford care, Kino finds the largest pearl he's ever seen on one of his dives. The pearl, which brings the potential of great fortune, ignites the neighbors' jealousy, eventually becoming a dangerous agent of evil.

'East of Eden' (1952)

Once again set in Steinbeck's hometown of Salinas, California, this story follows the intersecting stories of two farming families, the Trasks and the Hamiltons, from the Civil War to World War I, as their lives reenact the fall of Adam and Eve and the rivalry of Cain and Abel. The book was later adapted into a 1955 film directed by Elia Kazan and starring James Dean in his first major movie role. Dean was later nominated for an Academy Award for his performance, which he received posthumously.

Some of Steinbeck's other works include *Cup of Gold* (1929), *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932) and *To a God Unknown* (1933), all of which received tepid reviews. It wasn't until *Tortilla Flat* (1935), a humorous novel about paisano life in the Monterey region was released, that the writer achieved real success.

Steinbeck struck a more serious tone with *In Dubious Battle* (1936) and *The Long Valley* (1938), a collection of short stories. He continued to write in his later years, with credits including *Cannery Row* (1945), *Burning Bright* (1950), *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961) and *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* (1962).

John Steinbeck's Awards

In 1940 Steinbeck earned Steinbeck a Pulitzer Prize for *The Grapes of Wrath*.

In 1962, the author received the Nobel Prize for Literature — "for his realistic and imaginative writings, combining as they do sympathetic humour and keen social perception." Upon receiving the award, Steinbeck said the writer's duty was "dredging up to the light our dark and dangerous dreams for the purpose of improvement."

When and Where Was John Steinbeck Born?

John Steinbeck was born on February 27, 1902, in Salinas, California.

Childhood and Family

John Steinbeck was raised with modest means. His father, John Ernst Steinbeck, tried his hand at several different jobs to keep his family fed: He owned a feed-and-grain store, managed a flour plant and served as treasurer of Monterey County. His mother, Olive Hamilton Steinbeck, was a former schoolteacher.

For the most part, Steinbeck — who grew up with three sisters — had a happy childhood. He was shy but smart. He formed an early appreciation for the land, and in particular California's Salinas Valley, which would greatly inform his later writing. According to accounts, Steinbeck decided to become a writer at the age of 14, often locking himself in his bedroom to write poems and stories.

Education

In 1919 Steinbeck enrolled at Stanford University — a decision that had more to do with pleasing his parents than anything else — but the budding writer would prove to have little use for college.

Over the next six years, Steinbeck drifted in and out of school, eventually dropping out for good in 1925, without a degree.

Early Career

Following Stanford, Steinbeck tried to make a go of it as a freelance writer. He briefly moved to New York City, where he found work as a construction worker and a newspaper reporter, but then scurried back to California, where he took a job as a caretaker in Lake Tahoe and began his writing career.

John Steinbeck's Wives and Children

John Steinbeck was married three times and had two sons. In 1930 Steinbeck met and married his first wife, Carol Henning. Over the following decade, he poured himself into his writing with Carol's support and paycheck, until the couple divorced in 1942.

Steinbeck was married to his second wife, Gwyndolyn Conger, from 1943 to 1948. The couple had two sons together, Thomas (born 1944) and John (born 1946). In 1950 Steinbeck wed his third wife, Elaine Anderson Scott. The couple remained together until his death in 1968.

When and How Did John Steinbeck Die?

Steinbeck died of heart disease on December 20, 1968, at his home in New York City.

Curley's Wife's Lack of Name

Curley's wife is never called by her own name as a way of depicting her lack of independence. By only referring to her as Curley's wife, her identity is confined to the limited, dependent role she must play in her marriage. This lack of autonomy further explains the reasoning for Curley's wife's discontentment, since she has almost no ability feel fulfilled as an individual.

Alternate Perspective

While I acknowledge the added drama, I see no proof of sexist implication and attribute no other thematic or plot significance to the missing name. Her lack of a name is simply rooted in realism. It's the way workers refer to married women whose name they don't know. How would you expect them to refer to her--"that woman with the curly blonde hair?" The world of post-feminist literary criticism has swarmed all over the absence of a name for Curley's wife, but it's a red herring. I suspect Steinbeck modeled the story after some experience he had working on or around a ranch or farm.

After reading most of his works, his letters, many articles of literary analysis and the Benson biography, I'd put sexist way down any list of adjectives describing John Steinbeck. On the contrary, he was an early feminist. It's a waste of energy to interpret a work of classic literature by current norms and values.

A different perspective

Curley's wife, like the other players in the drama, is simply a character type and the only woman in the plot. She is defined by her role: Curley's wife or possession. George and Candy call her by other names such as "jailbait" or "tart." She wears too much makeup and dresses like a "whore" with red fingernails and red shoes with ostrich feathers. Lennie is fascinated by her and cannot take his eyes off her. He keeps repeating "she's purty." George, realizing Lennie's fascination, warns him to stay away from her.

The California Dream

The California Dream is the psychological motivation to gain fast wealth or fame in a new land. As a result of the California Gold Rush after 1849, California's name became indelibly connected with the Gold Rush, and fast success in a new world became known as the "California Dream". California was perceived as a place of new beginnings, where great wealth could reward hard work and good luck. The notion inspired the idea of an American Dream. California was seen as a lucky place, a land of opportunity and good fortune. It was a powerful belief, underlying many of the accomplishments of the state, and equally potent when threatened.

Observers report a common stereotyped perception that people are happier in California. This perception is anchored in the perceived superiority of the California climate, and is justified to some extent by the fact that Californians are indeed more satisfied with their climate than are Midwesterners, with much of California enjoying a Mediterranean climate.

Historian Kevin Starr in his seven-volume history of the state has explored in great depth the "California Dream"—the realization by ordinary Californians of the American Dream. California starting in the late 19th century promised the highest possible standard of life for the middle classes, and indeed for the skilled blue collar workers and farm owners as well. Poverty existed, but was concentrated among the migrant farm workers made famous in *The Grapes of Wrath*, where the Joad family, driven out of the Dust Bowl, searches for the California Dream. By the 1950s the Joads and the other "Okies" and "Arkies" (migrants from Oklahoma and Arkansas) were achieving the dream too. It was not so much the upper class (who preferred to live in New York and Boston). The California Dream meant an improved and more affordable family life: a small but stylish and airy house marked by a fluidity of indoor and outdoor space, such as the ubiquitous California bungalow and a lush backyard—the stage, that is, for quiet family life in a sunny climate. It meant very good jobs, excellent roads, plentiful facilities for outdoor recreation, and the schools and universities that were the best in the world by the 1940s.

Of Mice and Men | Introduction

Of Mice and Men is a novel set on a ranch in the Salinas Valley in California during the Great Depression of the 1930s. It was the first work to bring John Steinbeck national recognition as a writer. The title suggests that the best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry, a reference to Robert Burns's poem "To a Mouse." Of Mice and Men was selected for the Book of the Month Club before it was officially published, an honor that encouraged 117,000 copies of the novel to be sold before its official publication on February 25, 1937. Critical response to the novel was generally positive. There were, however, critics who were offended by the rough earthiness of the characters and their lives. By April 1937, the book was on best-seller lists across the country, and it continued to remain a top seller throughout that year. Steinbeck said that he was not expecting huge sales, and he was surprised by the substantial checks he received from his agents. In fact, Steinbeck became a celebrity with the publication of his novel, a status that he feared would negatively affect his work. Steinbeck conceived Of Mice and Men as a potential play. Each chapter is arranged as a scene, and each scene is confined to a single space: a secluded grove, a bunkhouse, and a barn.

With the success of the novel, Steinbeck worked on a stage version with playwright George Kaufman, who directed the play. Of Mice and Men opened on Broadway in New York City on November 23, 1937, with Wallace Ford as George and Broderick Crawford as Lennie. The reviews were overwhelmingly positive, and the play ran for 207 performances, winning the prestigious New York Drama Critics' Circle Award. The action of the novel occurs over the course of three days. Steinbeck created the novel's two main characters, George Milton and Lennie Small, to portray victims of forces beyond their control. George and Lennie are two migrant agricultural workers on a California ranch who share a dream of owning their own farm someday. They take jobs at a ranch where their hopes are at first raised but then destroyed by a tragic accident. Steinbeck depicts George and Lennie as two innocents whose dream conflicts with the realities of a world dominated by materialism and greed. Their extraordinary friendship distinguishes them from other hopeless and lonely migrant farm workers. The novel portrays a class of ranch workers in California whose plight had been previously ignored in the early decades of the twentieth century. In fact, George and Lennie are like mice in the maze of modern life. The great friendship they share does not prove sufficient to allow them to realize their dream. As a young man, Steinbeck learned about migrant laborers, usually unmarried men recruited to work during harvest seasons, from his own experience as a worker on company-owned ranches. With Of Mice and Men, Steinbeck became a master craftsman, ready to write his masterpiece The Grapes of Wrath the following year.

Background

Steinbeck drew heavily from his own experiences. Four of his novels, Tortilla Flat, Of Mice and Men, In Dubious Battle, and The Grapes of Wrath, and several short stories are set in and around his hometown of Salinas, California. Reflecting his own love of central California, these stories take place in towns, ranches, and valleys that lie between the Gabilan Mountains and the coastal Santa Lucia Mountains.

Steinbeck was also acutely aware of the social and economic problems of the times. Having lived during the Great Depression of the 1930s, during bread lines and soup kitchens, during labor unrest and escalating unemployment, he was spared the suffering that befell so many. But he knew first hand the problems that they faced.

Before the Great Depression, and between sessions at Stanford University, Steinbeck worked at odd jobs on California ranches. During one summer early in his college career, Steinbeck bucked barley on a ranch just south of Salinas. These experiences exposed him to the lower strata of society and provided him with material that would later appear in his novels of the 1930s.

Tortilla Flat (1935) drew on his experiences with Californian migrant workers living on the outer fringes of society. This was his first attempt to rouse an audience's pity for the conditions of transient laborers, but it was not to be his last.

Steinbeck continued to speak for the exploited man with *In Dubious Battle* (1936). This controversial novel was an account of migrant workers caught in a California labor strike. Steinbeck had witnessed up close the intolerable conditions under which these men were forced to work. He had seen certain groups who were badly hurt by the system in which they lived. In the novel he tried to create something meaningful from the behavior of these exploited people who were not able to speak for themselves.

Of Mice and Men (1937) maintains this focus on the migrant worker, here portraying his elusive dream of owning his own land. This is the same dream shared and lost by so many of the Depression era.

Following *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck continued his research into migrant worker conditions by spending four weeks with them, sharing in their living and working routines. He published several feature articles that reported on the dismal conditions he found. Steinbeck also drew from this experience while writing his Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).