

Year 9 English w/c 1st June

'Of Mice & Men' Week 1: Context Research

This term we will be studying the novella *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck.

The book is divided into six chapters, and for each chapter you will be completing a variety of activities to develop your understanding of the text.

Before we start looking at the novel itself, it will be useful to explore some of the background of John Steinbeck, his work and its historical and social context.

Task 1: read the information below and highlight the key information.

Biographical Context: John Steinbeck (1902–1968)

Who Was John Steinbeck?

John Steinbeck 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 labourer 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.

Early Life and Education

John Ernst Steinbeck Jr. was born on February 27, 1902, in Salinas, California and many of his novels are set in this part of the USA. 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.

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.

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 returned to California, where he took a job as a caretaker in Lake Tahoe and began his writing career, publishing his first novel, 'Cup of Gold', in 1929. It was not a success. Before finding success as a writer he worked in a variety of labouring jobs. This experience was reflected in his work, with many of his novels dealing with the plight of the poor and dispossessed. Between 1932 and 1935 he published another 3 novels but it wasn't until the last of these, *Tortilla Flat*, that he finally gained public recognition and financial security.

John Steinbeck's Books

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). Several of his books have been made into films. *Of Mice and Men* has been filmed twice, once in 1939 and again in 1992. Much of Steinbeck's work deals with the way society mistreats its poorest and most vulnerable people.

'Of Mice and Men' (1937)

Two poor migrant workers, George and Lennie, are working for the American dream in California during the Great Depression. Lennie, who has a mild mental disability, is steadfastly faithful to his friend George, but he has a habit of getting into trouble. Their goal: to own an acre of land and a shack. After they both secure jobs working the fields of the Salinas Valley — Steinbeck's own hometown — their dream seems more attainable than ever. However, Lennie's inclinations eventually get him into trouble again, spiraling to a tragic conclusion for both men. The book was later transformed into a Broadway play and three movies.

'The Grapes of Wrath' (1939)

Widely considered Steinbeck's finest and most ambitious novel, this book tells the story of a dispossessed Oklahoma family and their struggle to carve out a new life in California at the height of the Great Depression, the book captured the mood and angst of the nation during this time period. At the height of its popularity, *The Grapes of Wrath* sold 10,000 copies per week. Considered by many to be his greatest work, 'The Grapes of Wrath' won the Pulitzer Prize in 1940.

'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 neighbours' 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 re-enact 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).

Awards

In 1940, Steinbeck earned 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."

Later Life

During World War II, Steinbeck served as a war correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*.

Around this same time, he travelled to Mexico to collect marine life with friend Edward F. Ricketts, a marine biologist. Their collaboration resulted in the book *Sea of Cortez* (1941), which describes marine life in the Gulf of California.

Between 1940 and 1951, Steinbeck's output was prolific, including novels, dramas and works on marine biology.

He spent several months travelling around the USA with his pet poodle. You can read about his experiences in *Travels with Charley in Search of America* (1962).

Wives and Children

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 pay-check, 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.

Social Context: The Great Depression

The 29 October 1929 was known as 'Black Tuesday' in America. The huge crash of the stock market brought an end to the prosperity that had characterized the United States throughout the 1920s, and signalled the start of the Great Depression.

Unemployment rose from around 3% in 1929 to over 26% by 1934. Many of the poorest members of US society suffered badly, and at one point it was estimated that 34 million men, women and children had no income at all. Many people were evicted from their homes and ended up living in shanty towns. This crisis in the US economy forms the background to many of Steinbeck's novels.

Task 2: create your own Steinbeck timeline:

Which significant events in John Steinbeck's life happened at these times? Create your own biographical timeline. You could use the dates below to prompt you.

1902: _____

1919–25: _____

1929: _____

1932–35: _____

1937: _____

1939: _____

1940–51: _____

1952: _____

1962: _____

1968: _____

Task 3: undertake your own research on The Great Depression using the Internet and complete a mind-map, like the example on the next page.

Use these links to help:

Of Mice & Men in Context Part 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5063FCAH8mM>

Of Mice & Men in Context Part 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LIH2R2twn00>

Sparknotes: <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/micemen/context/>

BBC Bitesize: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zsxgp39/revision/1>

Extension Task: research some or all of the following aspects of the context of the novel and create mind-maps for each one.

- Racism in 1930s America, including the 'Jim Crow' laws.
- The different roles and treatment of men and women in 1930s America.
- The life of migrant workers in 1930s America.
- The treatment of the elderly and disabled in 1930s America.
- The American Dream.

The Social Context: The Great Depression

Mind-map everything you have found out about The Great Depression.



**The Great
Depression**