***Of Mice and Men:* Context – Background Information**

Written by American author John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men* was first published in 1937. The novel is set in a place called Soledad, (a Spanish word meaning solitude or loneliness) in California.

The novel is set during the Great Depression, a period of significant poverty and unemployment across the USA following the Wall Street Crash in 1929.

John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California in 1902. Although his family was not poor, when he was a teenager he spent time working on ranches near his home and this had a big impact on his writing. His experience of working with farm labourers and his interest in their lives is clearly evident in *Of Mice and Men*, as well as in some of his other books, like *The Grapes of Wrath*.

**The Great Depression**

The Great Depression took place following the Wall Street Crash in October 1929 and affected the world’s economy. Wall Street is a street in New York City, where many financial firms are based, and the term Wall Street is used to describe the American sector, even though not all American finance companies are actually based there. The Wall Street Crash happened as a result of the following factors:

* many normal Americans had started investing in the stock exchange and borrowing money to do so
* stock prices rose unsustainably
* in October 1929, investors began to sell their shares en masse, with 12.9 million shares sold on Black Thursday (24th October 1929) and 16 million shares sold on Black Tuesday (29th October 1929)

There were other circumstances that contributed to the depression in the USA as well:

* too many goods were being made and not enough were being bought
* food prices were dropping, affecting farmers’ incomes
* there were too many small banks, which did not have the funds to manage when masses of customers withdrew savings in the autumn of 1929. Following the Wall Street Crash, the USA recalled the huge loans that it had made to several European countries, meaning that the European economy was also affected by the Great Depression

The Great Depression lasted for ten years worldwide, and for the USA it did not fully end until 1941 when the country became involved in World War Two. The depression got increasingly worse between 1929 and 1932. At the peak of the Great Depression, it is thought that between 13 million and 15 million people in the USA were unemployed. Industrial production in the country dropped by almost half and house building decreased by 80%. Many people across America suffered from poverty, hunger and disease as a result of the depression. Benefits that we are used to having access to today, like Jobseekers’ Allowance, did not exist in America at this time, so people who lost their jobs could also lose their homes and found it very difficult to buy food.

### Itinerant Workers

Farmers were usually less affected than the rest of the population during depressions because they were able to grow their own food; however, during the Great Depression, there was also the Dust Bowl – drought and dust storms swept across several states in mid-west America. This resulted in crops being very poor in these areas, which was coupled with falling prices for food. Small farmers were affected particularly badly by these conditions. Many small farmers were in debt because they would borrow money from banks to buy seeds and then pay back the loans when the crops came in; during the Dust Bowl, farmers could not pay back these loans and could also not afford to feed themselves and their families. In worst case scenarios, this led to banks repossessing farms, making the farmers and their families homeless.

As a result, many farmers migrated to California to look for work, as this state was perceived to have spare land and a lot of work. However, because so many people moved to California (an estimated 1.3 million), work was not so easy to find. Ranch workers like George and Lennie often moved from one place to another looking for work, as jobs on ranches would be temporary and seasonal. Wages for men like these were low and jobs were scarce, so the lifestyle that they lived was very insecure. Without work, people would have no way of supporting themselves. This is why the dream is so important to George and Lennie: it would give them a sense of safety and independence.

### African Americans in the 1930s

Although all Americans were affected by the Great Depression, African Americans were hit the hardest. It is thought that by the end of 1932, 50% of black Americans were unemployed. In some cities in the northern states, white people called for black people to be fired from their jobs due to unemployment in the white communities. African-Americans received less aid than their white counterparts and were sometimes even not allowed to use charity soup kitchens.

Racism increased during the Great Depression and racial violence, which had been decreasing, rose again during the economic downturn. Although Crooks has a stable job, his character reflects the discrimination that many black Americans had to endure during this period in the USA.

### The Book’s title

The title of the book Of Mice and Men comes from a poem by Scottish poet Robbie Burns in the 18th century. The poem is written in Scots dialect:

# *To a Mouse*

by **Robbie Burns**

*The best laid schemes o' mice an' men*

*Gang aft a-gley,*

*An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,*

*For promised joy!*

The poem is about a mouse who builds a nest in a wheat field ready for the winter, but this is destroyed by a ploughman. The lines above mean The best laid plans of mice and men/Often go wrong/And leave us with nothing but grief and pain/Instead of the joy that was promised. This is linked to the events of Of Mice and Menbecause George and Lennie’s plan for happiness and safety is also destroyed, leading to pain and suffering at the end of the novel.