

# OF MICE AND MEN

## by John Steinbeck

### THE AUTHOR AND HIS TIMES



John Steinbeck always planned to be a writer. He was basically a shy person; he rarely granted interviews and felt a little uncomfortable as he gained more fame and publicity. He didn't really enjoy face-to-face contact, even with his friends, and never felt he communicated well over the telephone. Steinbeck was most at ease when he was writing. In his lifetime, he wrote thousands of letters (sometimes even six or seven a day), 16 novels, one short story collection, eight works of nonfiction, and

two film scripts.

Steinbeck's favourite instrument was the pencil. He would start each day with 24 newly sharpened pencils and would need to sharpen them again before the day was through. He wrote in a tiny script, usually on yellow legal-size pads. Little by little, however, his pencils gave way to a typewriter on which he continued to pound out letters and prose at a remarkable pace.

Steinbeck never wrote an autobiography, but all of his writing contains pieces of his life story. The settings of most of the books are the areas near Salinas and Monterey, in California, where Steinbeck was born and lived most of his life. He came from a working-class background, and most of his characters have to struggle to make a living. Before he began making enough money to live on with his writing, Steinbeck worked as a ranch hand, bricklayer, fruit picker, and marine biologist. He worked with union members and with migrant laborers. These people became the focus of his most important writing. And all of his experiences helped to mold the plots and themes of his books.

Steinbeck's early novels were also conceived in the 1930s during the Great Depression.

#### **The Great Depression**

stock (Aktien); stockholder (Aktionär); malnutrition (Unterernährung); mortgage (Hypothek)

The Great Depression was a worldwide economic decline in 1930's. It was the most difficult and longest period of unemployment and low business activity in modern times. The Depression began in October 1929, when the stock values dropped very quickly. Many stockholders lost large amounts of money. Banks, factories, and stores closed and left millions of Americans jobless and penniless. Most families had to depend on charity to provide food.

When the Depression began Herbert Hoover was the President and in 1932 Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected President. Roosevelt's reforms gave the Government more power and helped ease the depression.

The Depression caused a very sharp decrease in world trade because each country raised taxes on imported goods trying to help their own industries. The depression caused some countries to change their type of government and their leader.

The stock market crash occurred from 1925 to 1929. During this period the price of common stocks on the New York Stock Exchange more than doubled. When stock values rose it encouraged many people to buy stocks hoping to make large profits following the future price increases.

Black Thursday was Oct 24, 1929 when the stock values dropped. The Friday and Saturday after Black Thursday stock prices remained steady. On Monday stock prices fell once again. By Tuesday, October 29, the stockholders panicked and began to sell a record of 16,410,030 shares of stock.

Millions of Americans suffered from a disease caused by malnutrition. People lost their homes because they didn't have enough money to pay their mortgage. In 1932 at least 200,000 young people and 25,000 families roamed through the country looking for food, clothing, shelter, and a job.

The Great Depression had many effects on the United States. It produced new laws that gave the government far more power than at any time in the history of our nation. It changed the American society's outlook toward life.

Poverty and rootlessness seem to hang over the lives of Steinbeck's characters. Perhaps this mirrors not only the period of time but also the author's own struggles to find a place in which he could write, and an audience to recognize and appreciate his writings.

Steinbeck was born in Salinas on February 27, 1902. His father was a farmer and treasurer of Monterey County. His mother was a schoolteacher in Salinas. From his mother, Steinbeck learned to love books— among his favorites were *Crime and Punishment*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Le Morte d'Arthur* (the first book he ever owned). He also loved to read the King James version of the Bible. As you will soon see, the last three of these books are echoed in interesting ways in *Of Mice and Men*.

Besides books, Steinbeck had another great love while he was growing up — nature. He worked on farms and ranches during his high-school vacations and developed a closeness to the land and the plants and creatures that lived on it. This sensitivity toward nature found its place in Steinbeck's writings, particularly *UK Red Pony*, *The Pastures of Heaven*, and *Of Mice and Men*. In each of these works Steinbeck's natural settings are places of both life and death, places that allow human beings to enter them but refuse to be dominated by human beings. Such a place is the spot along the banks of the Salinas River where the opening and closing scenes of *Of Mice and Men* occur. This setting is alive, but death always lurks nearby. Within the novel, it serves as both a haven and a burial ground. Although Steinbeck studied nature and natural forces, his real focus was always people. Steinbeck was a careful observer and listener. His books are noted for the accuracy of their characters and language. For example, the bunk house in *Of Mice and Men* comes alive for readers because of Steinbeck's understanding of the patterns of the ranch hands' lives and the rhythms of their speech. He had, after all, lived these patterns and rhythms himself.

Steinbeck's critics have sometimes accused him of being too careful and objective in his presentation of his characters and stories. They have complained that the writer was too

much of a scientific observer (the marine biologist side of him) and did not feel or present enough real emotion in his works. As you read *Of Mice and Men*, you'll have to decide for yourself whether Steinbeck is genuinely sympathetic toward his characters and their troubles or whether he has chosen merely to sit back and watch them in their hopeless struggle to improve their lives.

Steinbeck's career can generally be broken down into three periods: 1) the years before fame (1929-34); 2) the years of growing fame (1935-45); and 3) the years of continued popularity (the period after World War II until his death in 1968). *Of Mice and Men* was written during the middle period, along with Steinbeck's most famous work, *The Grapes of Wrath*. The period between the Depression and World War II was a bittersweet time in the United States; Steinbeck's writings reflect the sense of loneliness and desperation many Americans felt. The books are sad but truthful, and they won immediate and lasting public approval.

Steinbeck published his first novel, *Cup of Gold*, in 1929. It failed to earn back the \$250 the publisher had given the author as an advance. Steinbeck was not really surprised by the book's failure. In one of his letters he wrote that he didn't expect to be "above average" until his fifth book. As it turned out, Steinbeck underestimated himself. His fourth book, *Tortilla Flat*, published in 1935, won him public acceptance and critical attention. It also earned some money for him. Steinbeck received between \$3000 and \$4000 for the film rights to *Tortilla Flat*. For a man used to earning \$35 a week, this seemed like a fortune. Steinbeck determined to get even more serious about his writing: his career was entering its second phase.

Two years later, he published *Of Mice and Men*. It was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection and earned Steinbeck the honour of being named one of the Ten Outstanding Young Men of the Year.

The book was not an easy one to write. Steinbeck determined to create a new literature form with it. He called this form a *play-novelette*, a short novel that contained the sparseness of language and description of a play. Steinbeck expected problems getting the form just right, but there was one problem he didn't anticipate—one night, while he and his wife were out, their Irish Setter puppy found the manuscript and destroyed nearly half of it. It took Steinbeck two months to re-create the missing parts.

As soon as Steinbeck finished the book, he immediately began work on a play version of the story, which had a successful run on Broadway in 1938. The author was not in attendance on opening night; instead he was living in a migrant camp in Oklahoma. He was developing the first-hand insights for his most important work, *The Grapes of Wrath*, published the next year. *The Grapes of Wrath* was powerful, controversial, and, most of all, popular. It was the best-selling book of 1939 and one of the top sellers of 1940 as well. Steinbeck's portrayal of a family of displaced Oklahoma farmers plagued by elements of nature and human injustice won him both fame and hatred. He even received several threats on his life. A Congressman called the book "a black, infernal creation of a distorted mind," while Steinbeck's peers awarded him both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Booksellers' Award. Over half a million copies of the original edition were sold.

None of Steinbeck's later works could match the sharpness of *Of Mice and Men* or the power and scope of *The Grapes of Wrath*, but they earned him fame and money nonetheless. The author remained very popular with the public but fell out of critical favour for a while. Recently, however, his works have found revival on television, in movies and on stage.

Following the publication of his last novel, *The Winter of Our Discontent*, Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962. The award noted Steinbeck's "great feeling for nature, for the tilled soil, the wasteland, the mountains, and the ocean coasts ... in the midst of and beyond the world of human beings."

Perhaps the clearest embodiment of Steinbeck's feelings for nature and his careful observation of our place within the natural scheme of things is in *Of Mice and Men*. The book is Steinbeck's statement of the pain of human loneliness and the struggle of man to find a home within the "fat of the land." The book has remained popular not because the novel is hopeful or happy (it isn't), but because, like all of Steinbeck's writings, it rings true and clear.