

Of Mice and Men

John Steinbeck's classic novella is set during the Great Depression – a time of mass unemployment across the United States. Low-paid workers like farm laborers were hit particularly hard by the crisis.

George and Lennie, the main characters of *Of Mice and Men*, are, like many, drifting from ranch to ranch desperate for a job. But they have a dream;

George: “Someday—we're gonna get the jack [money] together and we're gonna have a little house and a couple of acres an' a cow and some pigs and—”

Lennie: “An’ live off the fatta the lan’... An’ have rabbits!”

The two are lost without each other – Lennie provides George with unquestioning adoration and George provides Lennie with tiptop advice – like not to squeeze things quite so hard.

Lennie and George arrive at Tyler Ranch and get work as farm labourers. Unfortunately, the boss's son Curley is a nasty piece of work who likes to pick on bigger fellas. He attacks Lennie - who gives Curley's hand a squeeze and Curley is left, as Steinbeck puts it,

“flopping like a fish on a line.”

Days later Lennie is sitting alone in the barn in mourning for a dead puppy he has also squeezed a little too hard. Curley's wife, who is extremely lonely, wanders in and asks Lennie to stroke her hair. But he hurts her – she screams and Lennie panics – and when Lennie panics he - you guessed it – squeezes.

George finds Lennie hiding by the waterhole. He calms him down and fills his head with rabbits. As Curley and his murderous mob approach George pulls out a gun and shoots Lennie in the back of the head. The End.

Having worked on ranches himself Steinbeck knew how lonely many farm labourers were. He examines this by comparing the friendship of George and Lennie with the isolation of other characters in the book, such as Curley or Crooks. As George says;

“We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us... If them other guys gets in jail, they can rot for all anybody gives a damn” ...”But not us!”

George and Lennie's imaginary rabbit farm has a wider significance – representing as it does the American Dream – the reason to keep on struggling in the face of adversity – something shared by all the characters in the book – from Candy to Crooks to Curley's wife.

Bitesize

Though it may seem brutal George's shooting of Lennie is in fact the ultimate selfless act – preserving his best friend's child-like innocence and happiness in the face of impending attack from Curley and his mob.