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| **The Great Depression**  Of Mice and Men takes place during America's [Great Depression](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/study_guide/The-Beginnings-of-the-Great-Depression.topicArticleId-25238,articleId-25205.html), which lasted from the Stock Market Crash of October 1929 until 12 years later when [World War II](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/study_guide/The-Home-Front.topicArticleId-25238,articleId-25215.html) began.  Banks collapsed. Businesses closed. Then environmental catastrophe struck as well. By 1933, a quarter of the population was unemployed.  Many people lost their jobs. There was no welfare state or unemployment benefit. Disabled or old people had to depend on their families or charity and keep working for as long as they could. If they did get compensation for injuries (like Candy) it was not enough to live on. Few 'retired'. If people had no job, they had no money and might starve. Men could not afford to marry. Those who were already married found when they lost their jobs that they could no longer support their families. It was a frightening time.  There was a lot of competition for jobs. Men became ruthless and suspicious of each other as they fought over limited resources (jobs). Few could afford to be kind or noble, giving up their time to look after the old or the weak out of kindness. | **The Dustbowl**  The increase in farming activity across the Great Plains states caused the precious soil to erode. This erosion, coupled with a seven-year drought that began in 1931, turned once fertile grasslands into a desert like region known as the Dust Bowl. The drought killed crops, and with no plants to hold down the soil, the dry dirt swirled up into suffocating dust storms when the winds kicked in. Hundreds of thousands of farmers packed up their families and few belongings, and headed for California, which, for numerous reasons, seemed like a promised land.  **Itinerant Workers**  One result of the Depression was a lack of steady jobs, which resulted in an increase in the number of itinerant workers. For the most part, these itinerant workers were men who traveled from town to town seeking short-term employment.  Itinerant workers came to be known as Okies, for although they came from many states across the Great Plains, twenty percent of the farmers were originally from Oklahoma. Okies were often met with scorn by California farmers and natives, which only made their dislocation and poverty even more unpleasant.  An itinerant worker was not confined to a single place and often did not own [property](http://financial-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/property). Itinerant workers are most common in sectors with a large number of temporary jobs or a high degree of [seasonality](http://financial-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Seasonality). For example, an itinerant worker may be an agricultural worker who moves between two regions with slightly different growing seasons. |
| **Disability**  People with mental disabilities were treated very unsympathetically by the majority of society. Abnormal behaviour and low levels of economic productivity was regarded as a burden to society.  People were usually placed by, or removed from, their families (usually in infancy) and housed in large professional institutions, many of which were self-sufficient through the labour of the residents. Heavy tranquillisation and assembly line methods of support were the norm. Services were provided based on the relative ease to the provider, not based on the needs of the individual.  The Occupational Safety and Health Act was not introduced in the USA until 1970, so there was minimal health and safety regulations in 1930s California. Farmers used dangerous machinery and were often poorly trained, so accidents were common. While compensation for serious accidents was sometimes offered, the amount was often significantly below what a modern reader would expect.  **The Elderly**  The Depression hit the elderly particularly hard. Those who were retired or close to retirement watched a lifetime of savings disappear, and they weren't well enough to work or couldn't find the jobs that would allow them to rebuild their lost investments. That   made many of the elderly completely dependent on their families, but hard times for younger family members often meant little or nothing was left to provide for their parents | **Black America**  1930s life for black people was difficult due to racism. [Racial discrimination](http://www.oxnotes.com/prejudice-and-discrimination.html) was not illegal in 1930s America, therefore racism was still rampant at the time. Whites and blacks were segregated in 1930s America and blacks were considered as 2nd class citizens. Black people were paid less than their white counterparts and they had to work harder than everyone else, often given the more 'dirty work'. The lynching (hanging) of black people was common in 1930s America and The Ku Klux Klan still had a lot of power. Black people wanted to change the way they were treated but it was very difficult for them to do this as a result of the Jim Crow Laws, these were a number of laws in America enforced between 1876 and 1965 that provided a legal basis for segregating and discriminating against African-Americans.  **Women**  1920: Following their wartime role filling in for men, in 1920, women received the vote. They now had a voice! However, the Great Depression saw many jobs being lost – women were often the first to be ‘let go’  During the Depression, women were not trusted as they were seen to taking jobs away from men. With so little job prospects for women, many resigned themselves to life in the home. They became trapped in the context of the Great Depression (1.5 million women abandoned by their husbands in 1930’s America): fierce competition for employment and instability meant that women were marginalized (as were any other ‘second class’ citizens) because they did not offer practical labour.  Married women were the property of their husbands and young unmarried women who were not prostitutes presented a temptation and a threat to itinerant workers. The men see women as sexual objects not with an identity of their own.  **The American Dream**  This is the definition of the American Dream, from James Truslow Adams’ book, The Epic of America, which was written in 1931. He was the one to first use the term.  “The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to achieve the fullest stature of which they are capable of, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the circumstances of birth or position."  In America people had always believed that if they worked hard enough they could be successful – anybody could ‘make’ it, if they tried hard enough. This idea was known as the ‘American Dream’. In the 1930s, the myth of the American Dream was put to the test. Many individuals lost all they owned. They felt that they had no hope of making a decent life for themselves and lost all self‐respect and faith in their society. Some still clung desperately to the dream of success and opportunity, despite all evidence that it was unattainable.  John Steinbeck immortalized the plight of one such family, the Joads, in his most famous novel, The Grapes of Wrath. In several of his fiction works, including Of Mice and Men, Steinbeck illustrates how grueling, challenging, and often unrewarding the life of migrant farmers could be and how the American Dream was impossible to achieve in the 1930s. Just as George and Lennie dream of a better life on their own farm, the Great Plains farmers dreamed of finding a better life in California. The state’s mild climate promised a longer growing season and, with soil favorable to a wider range of crops, it offered more opportunities to harvest. Despite these promises, though, very few found it to be the land of opportunity and plenty of which they dreamed. |