

# John Steinbeck

## A biography

a cura di Sarah Gudgeon

Edizioni Febbraio 2018

### 1. Read

John Steinbeck, the American author, was born in California in 1902. His hometown, Salinas, was a rural settlement and John and his family lived a simple life. His father did different jobs to try and make enough money for the family and John worked on farms in the summer. He often worked with migrant workers, all of whom were struggling during the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl period (when sand storms severely damaged the agriculture industry) that engulfed America at the time. John's early experiences and exposure to social injustice provided lots of material for his books. He decided to become a writer when he was 14 years old and went on to win the Nobel Peace prize for literature in 1962. His special talent was his: "realistic and imaginative writing, combining as it does sympathetic humor and keen social perception."

Steinbeck's most famous works include *Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men*: both of these novels dealt with social issues that affect ordinary people. *Grapes of Wrath* was an anti-capitalist story based on a series of newspaper articles that Steinbeck wrote in San Francisco and *Of Mice and Men* was about two migrant farm workers, George and Lennie. Lennie was physically very big and strong but his mental age was that of a child. Inevitably, with no social services to protect this vulnerable individual, and despite the best efforts of George, things started to go wrong.

Unfortunately, many of the same issues of social injustice that Steinbeck wrote about in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are still here with us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Maybe with the help of today's socially aware writers and artists, we can start to make a change and move towards a more equal society for everyone, regardless of social status or ethnic origin.

### 2. Who was John Steinbeck? Describe his early life.

**3. Summarise the key themes of Steinbeck's work in no more than 100 words.**

**4a. Read this extract from the summary of Chapter 5 of the novel *Of Mice and Men*. Lennie is already upset because he has accidentally killed a puppy and he doesn't want George to find out. Then the wife of one of the men on the farm comes to see him.**

When Lennie explains that he likes to pet soft things, Curley's wife reveals that she too likes to feel silk and velvet, and she invites him to feel her hair, which is very soft. He does, but his big, clumsy fingers start to mess it up, and she angrily tells him to let go. As she tries to get her hair away from Lennie, he becomes scared and holds on more tightly. When she begins to scream, Lennie covers her mouth with his hand. A struggle ensues — Lennie panicking and Curley's wife's eyes "wild with terror" — until her body flops "like a fish" and then she is still.

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**b. How do you think Lennie felt afterwards? Write a diary entry from his point of view.**

## Teacher's Notes

1. Before reading, try and elicit the titles of some of Steinbeck's most famous works (*Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men*). If the students don't know them, write them on the board and then ask them to name Italian writers with a social conscience (Benedetto Croce, who condemned fascism in his political roles and literary works and Luca Pirandello, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for literature in 1934).
2. Ask if any students would like to volunteer to read out their answers so that you could use the information to build a profile of the author.
3. Summarise the key themes of Steinbeck's works.

Sample answer:

*Steinbeck highlighted the suffering of those who were in financial difficulty and who needed to move around to find work during the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl period.*

4. Exercise 4b: remind the students that Lennie is very childlike in his perception of reality.

Sample answer:

*I'm really scared now. George is going to be so upset with me. I didn't mean to hurt anyone. The puppy was so soft and sweet. And the lady's hair was so silky. But then she started to make a lot of noise and she wouldn't stop. I didn't want anyone to come because then they might have found the dead puppy. I love puppies. It's very quiet now.*

### \* Sarah Gudgeon

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