OF MICE AND MEN

SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE NOVEL

• John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California in 1902.
• He worked on farms and ranches during vacations from university.
• He always intended becoming a writer.
• Of Mice and Men was first published in 1937 and is set in the early to middle 1930’s.
• Steinbeck also adapted the novel into a three-act play, also published in 1937.

The Dustbowl and migrant workers

• A recession which began in the mid 1920’s coupled with a severe drought caused mass migration to California.

• Farmers had to sell more crops to make the same amount of money.
• Due to this increased demand farmers bought up more land and invested in expensive agricultural equipment to farm.
• This put most farmers in debt.
• 1929 – Wall Street Crash – banks collapsed – demanded money back that had been loaned to farmers.
• Many farmers lost everything and became homeless.
• The average income between 1929 and 1932 was reduced by 40%.
• Some ranches became larger as those that could afford to, purchased neighbouring farms.
• 1930’s the American Dream became the American Nightmare as the population plunged into poverty and hunger.
• The best hope for a better life was California.
• 1931 a seven year drought began affecting the area known as the Great Plains – Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, resulting in huge migration of workers to California.
• These areas became known as the 'Dust Bowl'. Listen to Roosevelt talking about this from link on Mice and Men homepage.

• 20% of migrant workers were from Oklahoma and they collectively became known as Okies.

• From 1929 – 1932 Herbert Hoover was President – he offered prosperity but did little to help or support poor families. He created shanty towns known as 'Hoovervilles' for the poor to live in. He promised better times but delivered nothing and during his presidency most poor people lost hope of ever having a better life.

• Hoover said that
‘Patience and self-reliance are all that the American people need to get them through this passing incident in their National Lives’ – he completely misunderstood and mishandled the situation.

- By 1933 unemployment was at 25% (15 million).
- In 1932 Franklin D Roosevelt was elected as President and came up with a ‘New Deal’, to restore prosperity for poor Americans.
- In his inaugural address to the American people he famously said:

  ‘The only thing we have to fear is fear itself’.

- On his election he immediately put in place a sweeping programme of economic and agricultural reforms to help the poor.
- He regularly broadcast on the radio – known as ‘Fireside Chats’ to give hope to millions of Americans.