



Of Mice and Men in the Great Depression

Background & Setting



Susan McHale

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Grade Level	9th – 10th Grade	Time Frame	1-2 class period(s)
Subject	English/Language Arts, Social Studies	Duration	90 minutes
Course	American Literature, U.S. History		

Essential Question

What was society like during the 1930s? How does understanding the 1930s prepare us for reading "Of Mice and Men"?

Summary

This lesson analyzes the context and setting of the novel "Of Mice and Men." This cross-curricular lesson previews societal issues that were prevalent in John Steinbeck's text. Steinbeck was a young man during the Great Depression, and he wove the background and context of the Great Depression into several of his fictional novels. Students in this lesson will identify specific Depression-era struggles to gain insight into the setting, perspective, and background of the novel "Of Mice and Men." This lesson can serve as a preview prior to reading the novel.

Snapshot

Engage

Students individually view four photographs of the Great Depression era and make general observations.

Explore

Students team with others to share their observations about the Great Depression photographs.

Explain

Students read different informational texts about Great Depression issues and create short summaries of what they read.

Extend

Students groups create concept maps about the Great Depression and draw conclusions about American life during the Depression.

Evaluate

Students write a personal essay comparing Depression-era societal issues with issues in today's society.

Standards

Oklahoma Academic Standards: English Language Arts (Grade 9)

9.2.R.1: Summarize the main ideas and paraphrase significant parts of increasingly complex texts.

9.2.R.2: Identify characteristics of genres and analyze how they enhance comprehension of fiction, poetry, drama, and nonfiction.

9.3.R.3: Evaluate how literary elements impact theme, mood, and/or tone, using textual evidence:

- setting
- plot structure (e.g., foreshadowing, flashback, *in media res*)
- conflict (i.e., internal, external)
- characters (e.g., protagonist, antagonist)
- characterization (i.e., direct, indirect)
- point of view (e.g., narrator reliability)
- archetypes

Attachments

- [Lesson Slides—Of Mice and Men in the Great Depression.pptx](#)
- [Reading 1 American Society in the Great Depression—Of Mice and Men in the Great Depression - Spanish.docx](#)
- [Reading 1 American Society in the Great Depression—Of Mice and Men in the Great Depression - Spanish.pdf](#)
- [Reading 1 American Society in the Great Depression—Of Mice and Men in the Great Depression.docx](#)
- [Reading 1 American Society in the Great Depression—Of Mice and Men in the Great Depression.pdf](#)
- [Reading 2 Minorities During the Great Depression—Of Mice and Men in the Great Depression - Spanish.docx](#)
- [Reading 2 Minorities During the Great Depression—Of Mice and Men in the Great Depression - Spanish.pdf](#)
- [Reading 2 Minorities During the Great Depression—Of Mice and Men in the Great Depression.docx](#)
- [Reading 2 Minorities During the Great Depression—Of Mice and Men in the Great Depression.pdf](#)
- [Reading 3 The Great Migration West—Of Mice and Men in the Great Depression - Spanish.docx](#)
- [Reading 3 The Great Migration West—Of Mice and Men in the Great Depression - Spanish.pdf](#)
- [Reading 3 The Great Migration West—Of Mice and Men in the Great Depression.docx](#)
- [Reading 3 The Great Migration West—Of Mice and Men in the Great Depression.pdf](#)
- [Reading 4 The Intellectually and Physically Disabled—Of Mice and Men in the Great Depression - Spanish.docx](#)
- [Reading 4 The Intellectually and Physically Disabled—Of Mice and Men in the Great Depression - Spanish.pdf](#)
- [Reading 4 The Intellectually and Physically Disabled—Of Mice and Men in the Great Depression.docx](#)
- [Reading 4 The Intellectually and Physically Disabled—Of Mice and Men in the Great Depression.pdf](#)
- [Reading 5 Women in the Great Depression—Of Mice and Men in the Great Depression - Spanish.docx](#)
- [Reading 5 Women in the Great Depression—Of Mice and Men in the Great Depression - Spanish.pdf](#)
- [Reading 5 Women in the Great Depression—Of Mice and Men in the Great Depression.docx](#)
- [Reading 5 Women in the Great Depression—Of Mice and Men in the Great Depression.pdf](#)

Materials

- Lesson slides (attached)
- Readings 1–5 (attached; print enough for each student to receive one of the five readings)
- Notebook paper
- Chart paper and markers or student devices with Internet access

Engage

Teacher's Note: Lesson Preparation

Prior to beginning this lesson, print the five informational texts found in the attachments. Not all students will read the same text. For example, for a class of thirty, you will need six copies of each text.

Begin the lesson by explaining to students that today they will learn about the background and setting of the novel, *Of Mice and Men*. John Steinbeck, the author, wrote about the struggles of men and women during the Great Depression. Steinbeck was a young man during the Great Depression, and this experience greatly influenced his writing. To understand Steinbeck's novels, we need to understand the society about which he wrote.

Use the attached **Lesson Slides** to guide the instruction. Display the learning objectives and the essential questions on **slides 2 and 3**, respectively. Discuss that these will be the focus of today's lesson.

Students will participate in an [I Think/We Think](#) activity. Ask students to fold a piece of notebook paper in half lengthwise, or hot dog style. Display **slide 4**, and ask students to create two columns with the headers "I Think" and "We Think."

Tell students that they will look at photographs from the era of the Great Depression (1929 through 1939). Slowly move through **slides 5–8**. As you display each photograph, ask students to write down any observations that they have about each image. Point out that the title of the photograph will serve as a clue to inform their observations. Allow 20–25 minutes for this activity.

Possible Student Observations

Each photograph is representative of the struggles of Americans during the Depression era. Possible observations might include: 1) Elementary School in Alabama—few students, chairs made out of logs, looks like it might be dirty, primitive metal stove, wooden floors; 2) Migrants Eating Lunch—steel mattress springs on back of car indicate they might be living there, eating food on the ground, maybe like a picnic, might be a father and kids; 3) A Visit from the Public Health Nurse—house looks like it is made out of metal, very poor, mother standing in the doorway, kids in the yard, kids are barefoot and clothes look worn, nurse possibly checking on family's health, junk in the yard; 4) Soup Kitchen in Washington, DC—men standing in line for food, serious faces, receiving charity, no one is laughing or smiling, bowls being filled with soup or food by the workers.

Explore

Ask students to find three other students to form a group of four. Have groups sit together and discuss their observations of the photographs. Display **slide 9**. As a group, have students discuss the question on the slide: *What do these pictures tell you about the Great Depression?* Groups should write down their collaborative response in the "We Think" column.

Possible Group Responses

Answers will vary, but some possible group responses might include: *The Great Depression was a time of poverty and hardships. People did not seem to have much. Some people were homeless and had little food. Families lived in poverty. People were out of work and had to accept charity from others.*

Have groups share out their responses in a class discussion.

Explain

Tell students that they will learn a little more about the Great Depression to prepare for reading *Of Mice and Men*. Number students one through five. Pass out the attached informational text that corresponds to the student's assigned number:

1. **American Society in the Great Depression**
2. **Minorities During the Great Depression**
3. **The Great Migration West**
4. **The Intellectually and Physically Disabled**
5. **Women in the Great Depression**

Display **slide 10**. Ask students to read their assigned informational text and annotate using the [CUS and Discuss](#) strategy.

Once students have read their assigned texts, have the class participate in an [Inverted Pyramid](#) activity.

Display **slide 11**. Have students find a partner who read the same text to discuss what they read and share their summaries. Allow only 5–7 minutes for this discussion.

Display **slide 12**. Have partners meet with another pair who read the same text. Have the group discuss the informational text and share what they learned or have summarized. Allow 7-10 additional minutes for this discussion.

Display **slide 13**. Have students create new groups of five who each read a different text so that the group has a representative for all the texts. These groups will work together to complete the activity described in the Extend portion of the lesson.

Teacher's Note: Group Size

If students cannot be evenly distributed into groups of five, consider adding one more group member for some groups to have six members. The goal is to have all the texts represented by students who read and previously discussed them.

Teacher's Note: Maximizing The Inverted Pyramid Strategy

The goal of the Inverted Pyramid strategy is for struggling or marginal readers to gain textual knowledge through repeated discussions of the text with a variety of people. This strategy works best if you monitor discussions throughout the room and keep the time period for each phase brief.

Extend

Once students are in their groups of five, give the groups time to share what they learned from their texts. Allow no more than 5–10 minutes for this sharing of information.

After their discussion, groups will create a concept map using chart paper and markers or a digital concept mapping tool. Display **slide 14**, which gives students an example of how to start their concept maps.

Ask students to add two or three details for each aspect of society that was affected by the Great Depression.

Teacher's Note: Tech Integration Option

A free and easy-to-use digital concept mapping tool for students is [Popplet](#). More free concept mapping tools for educators and students can be found [here](#). This link also appears in the resource list.

Allow 25–30 minutes for students to complete the concept map. Ask groups to present their completed concept maps to the class.

Display **slide 15**. Connect what students have learned about the Great Depression by sharing some details about the background and setting of the novel *Of Mice and Men*.

Display **slide 16**. Ask groups to make predictions about *Of Mice and Men*. You can record these on the board, in a Google Doc, on an [Anchor Chart](#), or you can have students submit their predictions in writing. Refer back to these predictions periodically as students read the novel.

Teacher's Note: Making Inferences About The Novel

Emphasize that Steinbeck was a young man during the Great Depression and that the setting of his most famous novels was this real-life era. You might need to reinforce the facts that students previously learned about the Great Depression to help them predict or make inferences about what will happen in the novel. Use probing questions to help them reflect on what they know. *What was the life of a migrant worker? How might people have behaved given the extreme poverty and hardships of the Great Depression? How might an intellectually disabled migrant worker manage in this setting?*

Evaluate

Then and Now: Ask students to reflect on what they learned about the Great Depression and compare it with what our society is like today. To begin this conversation, prompt students with the questions on **slide 17**.

- What issues exist with poverty today? How do these issues compare with the poverty of the Great Depression?
- How do women fare in the workplace today as compared to women during the Great Depression?
- What problems and treatment do immigrants and minorities face in our country today? Is discrimination the same, better, or worse?
- How has the treatment of the intellectually and physically disabled changed over the decades? Does discrimination still exist for people with disabilities?

Have students read through the questions and work individually to write a [Two-Minute Paper](#) about one of these topics.

Students' I Think/We Think responses and group concept maps can also serve as assessments for this lesson.

Resources

- Educational Technology and Mobile Learning. (2018, Jan. 26). 9 great concept mapping tools for teachers and students [Blog post]. <https://www.educatorstechnology.com/2018/01/9-great-concept-mapping-tools-for.html>
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Anchor Charts. <https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/58>
- K20 Center. (n.d.). CUS and Discuss. <https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/162>
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Inverted Pyramid. <https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/173>
- K20 Center. (n.d.). I Think / We Think. <https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/141>
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Popplet. Tech Tools. <https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/tech-tool/663>
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Two-minute paper. <https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/152>