

Tobacco Road Study Guide

Tobacco Road by Erskine Caldwell

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Plot Summary

Tobacco Road is a novel by acclaimed writer Erskine Caldwell. Tobacco Road is the story of one family's inability to move on when life does not go as planned. Jeeter Lester has always worked the land on which his grandfather once farmed tobacco; however, debts have turned Jeeter into a sharecropper on land that the owner no longer wants to farm. Jeeter vows every year that he will find a way to buy the seed and fertilizer needed to farm the land, but every year he finds excuses not to do the work until too much time passes and planting would be futile. Tobacco Road is a story of futility, of giving up, a story that will either inspire the reader to work that much harder or continue to give up in the face of adversity.

Lov Bensey is walking home from town where he had gone to buy a sack of turnips that will feed him and his wife for weeks. However, Lov decides to stop at the farm of his father-in-law to discuss his wife's behavior, knowing full well that the Lesters will try to steal the turnips. Lov tells his father-in-law that Pearl, his wife, will not sleep in his bed with him. Lov wants Jeeter to talk to Pearl. However, Jeeter is so set on getting some of Lov's turnips that he will not even offer advice. During their conversation, Lov notices Ellie May, Jeeter's other daughter, flirting with him from behind a tree. Soon Lov becomes so entranced with Ellie May that he forgets to protect his turnips. Jeeter steals the turnips and runs away.

Jeeter eats most of the turnips and then begins to feel badly. Jeeter shares some of the turnips with his son, Dude. They return to the house and find Sister Bessie, a local woman, waiting there. Jeeter shares some of the turnips with Sister Bessie and then listens as she prays. Jeeter reminds Sister Bessie to pray with Dude. Sister Bessie calls Dude up to the porch and wraps her arms around him to pray. Sister Bessie is so excited by Dude's touch that she almost forgets about what she is praying. When Jeeter draws her back to reality, Sister Bessie announces that she believes God wants her to marry again and that she will return tomorrow to discuss it with the Lester family.

The following day Sister Bessie announces to the Lesters that she wants to marry Dude and that God has instructed her that she and Dude should begin a ministry by driving around the country, spreading the word. Sister Bessie tells them her husband left her eight-hundred dollars and that she is going into town to use that money to buy a car. Dude goes with her. After they buy the car, Sister Bessie stops by the courthouse and talks the clerk into giving her a marriage license for her to marry Dude. Back at the Lester farm, Bessie performs the ceremony and encourages Dude to consummate the marriage.

Dude and Sister Bessie spend the day driving around in the new car. When they return to the Lester farm, the car is damaged. Dude tells them that a wagon was going too slowly on the road in front of them and they slammed into it, killing the black man driving the wagon; however, the accident was the black man's fault anyway. That night, Dude and Sister Bessie stay with the Lester in their small, two room house. When Sister



Bessie goes to bed, she cannot find Dude. She and Jeeter search and finally find him in bed with the old grandmother.

The next day, Jeeter talks Sister Bessie and Dude into taking him to Augusta to sell some firewood. They struggle during the trip to get there because they forgot to put oil in the car and they have damaged the engine. Once in Augusta, they cannot find anyone to buy the wood and end up selling the car's spare tire for extra cash. It becomes late, so they decide to stay in a hotel. Sister Bessie is pulled from the room and offered other places to sleep, finding herself sharing beds with several other men.

The following morning, they once again try to sell the wood but still cannot find any takers. Jeeter becomes angry and decides to burn the wood by the side of the road, but he cannot get it to burn. Once back at the farm, Jeeter argues with Sister Bessie over her decision not to take him to visit his son, Tom. When Jeeter learns that Tom refused to help his parents financially, Jeeter again argues with Sister Bessie and Dude. The argument escalates into a physical fight. Sister Bessie and Dude drive off, but as they do, they run over the old grandmother.

That night, after burying the old grandmother, Jeeter decides to burn the fields to prepare them for planting even though he does not have any money to buy seed. The fire burns away from the house, so Jeeter decides to go to bed. However, during the night the fire turns back toward the house and burns it down around Jeeter and his wife, Ada. Lov and Dude bury Jeeter and Ada the following day. Dude thinks maybe he might find a way to plant the fields.



Chapters 1-3

Chapters 1-3 Summary

Lov Bensey is Jeeter Lester's son-in-law. Lov is a hard working man who is employed by the railroad, but Jeeter Lester is a sharecropper who no longer farms because the land's owner no longer sees profit in it.

In chapter 1, Lov Bensey is walking home from Fuller where he bought a bag of turnips. Lov can see the Lester family in their yard and knows they will try to steal his turnips, but he needs to stop and talk to Jeeter Lester about Lov's wife, Pearl. Pearl is Jeeter's twelve-year-old daughter and Lov is hoping Jeeter will talk her into sleeping in Lov's bed where she belongs. Lov is also concerned because Pearl refuses to talk to him. Jeeter is not interested in helping him, however; Jeeter is more interested in getting his hands on some of those turnips. The Lester family has run out of food and have no means of getting any more; therefore, it is almost torture to have Lov sitting there with the turnips, especially when he starts eating them.

In chapter 2, Jeeter works on the inner tube to one of the tires on his old Ford car, hoping to repair the tires well enough to drive a load of fire wood into Augusta to sell. As he works, Jeeter watches Lov begin to flirt with his daughter, Ellie May. Ellie May is eighteen and much more interested in Lov than Pearl ever was. However, Ellie May has a harelip, a disfigurement that made Lov chose Pearl as his wife instead. Jeeter watches as Lov is drawn closer and closer to Ellie May, keeping him distracted from his sack of turnips. Jeeter is annoyed by Ellie May's action, complaining that she is making a fool of herself. Jeeter is annoyed by everyone, demanding that Lov give them some of his turnips. In chapter 3, Lov stops listening to Jeeter all together as Ellie May draws closer and closer to him. Jeeter excuses Ellie May's behavior, telling Lov that with her harelip, her body is the only thing she has to help her catch a man. Jeeter has always meant to take Ellie May to a doctor to have her lip sewn up, but something more important always seemed to come up. As Ellie May crawls into Lov's lap, pulling him from his bag of turnips, a group of black neighbors stop to watch the show and see if Lov might need their help.

Chapters 1-3 Analysis

Jeeter Lester and his family are introduced in these first pages. Jeeter is a sharecropper who has not planted a crop in several years. Jeeter and his family are starving because they do not have the money they need to buy supplies. In fact, it appears in these opening pages that all the Lesters have is the dilapidated house where they live—that and a son-in-law who makes enough money that he can provide for himself and his wife. Unfortunately, the son-in-law is having a difficult time with his wife and has stopped to speak to Jeeter about these problems. This causes Jeeter to see his son-in-law's turnips and begin searching for ways to get them from him.



Sex becomes an important theme in these early chapters as Lov explains to his father-in-law how his wife will not share his bed or even talk to him. Lov is distracted from this conversation when Ellie May, Jeeter's daughter, begins coming on to him. Lov is so lonely and in need of female companionship that he allows Ellie May to distract him from his original purpose and his turnips. This causes Jeeter to reveal that Lov was originally more interested in Ellie May, but she has a birth defect that causes him some pause. Pearl, Lov's wife, is a beautiful young woman, but she refuses to give Lov what he wants, whereas Ellie May, the physically-deformed young woman, is willing but hard to look at. It is a quandary that leaves Lov confused and unable to choose between the two women.



Chapters 4-6

Chapters 4-6 Summary

In chapter 4, Jeeter puts aside the air pump he has been using to pump up the inner tube and sneaks over to the turnip sack. Ada, Jeeter's wife, watches, her thoughts on her lovely daughter, Pearl. Pearl's too much like her father, Ada is thinking, rather than her mother. Jeeter was saying that Pearl was like Ada because Ada refused to speak in the early years of their marriage. However, Ada knows Pearl is like her father, a man who passed through the county for a few days years ago. Pearl has ambition, a desire to go to the city and make it on her own. As Jeeter continues to make his way across the yard, Dude continues to complain about Ellie May's behavior. Jeeter takes the turnips and runs into the woods with them. Lov is angry but does nothing about it. Lov goes home, leaving Ellie May lying naked in the middle of the yard. Dude goes after his father to try to get some of the turnips before they are all gone.

In chapter 5, Jeeter has eaten most of the turnips, but he is beginning to feel guilty. Jeeter shares a handful of turnips with Dude when he finds him, then the two of them walk back to the house, but only after Jeeter is reassured that Lov is gone. At the house, Jeeter and Dude find Sister Bessie, a neighbor, sitting on the porch with Ada. Sister Bessie is something of a religious minister and she prays with Jeeter when he arrives, praying God will forgive his thieving ways, even as she eats the turnips he stole. Sister Bessie then lectures Jeeter on the fact that God made Ellie May deformed to protect her from Jeeter's attentions. Sister Bessie understands Ellie May's deformity because she has a birth defect that left her with only nostrils, but no nose. Jeeter admits he has had extramarital affairs. Then Jeeter admits that if he was not only married, he would marry Bessie.

In chapter 6, Jeeter reminds Sister Bessie that she has not prayed with Dude. Sister Bessie brings Dude close to her and hugs him, enjoying the feel of his body against hers. Sister Bessie tells Jeeter that God wants her to marry again. Sister Bessie says that God wants her to marry and travel the country as a minister with her new spouse, so she will take the money her husband left her in a life insurance policy and buy a new car. Sister Bessie says she must go home and pray about this subject. Sister Bessie lives in a house also owned by Captain John, the man who owns the farm where the Lesters live. After Sister Bessie left, Ada complains that they do not have any snuff. Jeeter swears he is going to take a load of firewood to Augusta as soon as he gets the car working to sell and buy more supplies.

Chapters 4-6 Analysis

Jeeter steals the turnips and eats most of them himself, but then feels bad for stealing them. Jeeter then shares the turnips with his son, his wife and daughter, and a neighbor. The reader will note at this point, however, that Jeeter does not share any food with his

mother, Grandma Lester. The neighbor who comes over is Sister Bessie, a religious woman who likes to think of herself as a sort of minister, but she has no church and no congregation. However, Jeeter seems to believe in her religious prophesizing and promises to castrate himself for his past sexual sins. This promise is half hearted, however, because Jeeter puts it off to a future date.

Sister Bessie also seems to have a fascination with sex. When Sister Bessie hugs Dude, the sixteen-year-old son of Jeeter and Ada, she begins to talk about marriage. Sister Bessie wants to marry a boy who is so much younger than herself that the reader has to question her motives. The boy's parents, who should be concerned about this interest by an older woman, do not question her intentions. In fact, the idea that Sister Bessie will be buying a new car for the wedding, seems to have sold them. This causes the reader a great deal of concern about the intentions of the parents in this family. Finally, Sister Bessie has a deformity to her face, just like Ellie May. It seems that these deformities seem to symbolize deformities in the appearance and personalities of all the characters.



Chapters 7-10

Chapters 7-10 Summary

In chapter 7, Jeeter fails to apologize to Lov as he had intended to do and he does nothing to help Lov's problems with Pearl. Jeeter thinks about Ellie May and Lov's refusal to marry her because of her harelip. Jeeter has always intended to take Ellie May to a doctor in Augusta to have her face repaired, but something else always came up. Now there is no opportunity because Jeeter is no longer making money at farming. The owner of the land on which Jeeter and his family live, Captain John Harmon, no longer feels he can make money at farming, so he moved to Augusta. By doing this, Captain John cut off Jeeter's credit at all the stores in Fuller, making it impossible for him to provide for his family. The land all around Jeeter's farm was once owned by Jeeter's grandfather, a large plantation on which they once grew tobacco. However, Jeeter's father had so many debts that he and Jeeter both had to sell it all to pay them off. Jeeter and Ada have had seventeen children, five of whom died, and all the others, besides Ellie May and Dude, have left home. Jeeter knows little of where his children have gone except for the few he has heard about in Fuller. Tom, one of the eldest sons, lives in the next county where he runs a cross tie camp. Jeeter plans to go see him at some point and ask for money.

In chapter 8, Jeeter thinks he cannot leave the land because it is in his soul. This is why Jeeter has never left the country to work at the cotton mill in Augusta; however, Jeeter worries about dying in his old overalls. Ada worries about dying, too, but she worries about having nice clothes in which to be buried. Jeeter's biggest fear about dying is the idea that what happened to his father will happen to him. Jeeter's father was placed in the corn crib after his death while the men who were supposed to be watching his body went into town for cokes and tobacco. At the funeral, a giant rat raced out of the coffin and Jeeter's father had half his face eaten off. Jeeter is so frightened about ending up that way that he made Lov promise not to put his body in the corn crib.

In chapter 9, Sister Bessie returns to the Lester house and announces that God wants her to marry Dude. Jeeter asks Dude if he knows what Sister Bessie wants from him and Dude says he cannot do that with Bessie, until he realizes that she plans to buy a car for his exclusive use. Dude agrees then, walking into Fuller with Sister Bessie, stopping from time to time to allow Sister Bessie to keep up with him. In chapter 10, Dude waits outside while Sister Bessie buys the new car. The salesman take advantage of her because she has never bought a car before. Sister Bessie and Dude drive off with the car even though the state requires them to wait for the license to come in. Dude honks the horn all the way to the courthouse. There, Sister Bessie convinces the county clerk to give her a marriage license to marry Dude even though he is not old enough to legally consent.



Chapters 7-10 Analysis

The author gives some background on the Lester family in a narration that is a cross between the third person narration in Jeeter Lester's voice and an authorial voice. The background reveals why the Lester family does not have the money to care for themselves. It also reveals that, ironically, the Lester family once owned the farm Jeeter lives on and all the land around it. The land was a tobacco plantation, explaining why the dirt road beside the farm is called the tobacco road. All this information helps the reader see what kind of a person Jeeter Lester is. Jeeter is lazy and most likely was never a good farmer based on the fact that the man he worked for was not making enough money to keep him involved in farming.

Sister Bessie convinces Jeeter and Ada that God wants her to marry Dude and turn him into a traveling pastor. Even though Dude is under eighteen, the Lesters decide to allow Dude to get married because he will not only have a desirable woman as his wife, but he will have a new car to drive. Sister Bessie keeps her promise and buys the car, spending all her money on the car in order to get Dude to marry her. To the reader, this seems almost like a desperate move on Sister Bessie's part in order to bribe the man she desires into a relationship. The reader is unclear why a woman like Sister Bessie would want a man like Dude, but the fact that she is attracted to him sexually begins to explain this attraction some.



Chapters 11-14

Chapters 11-14 Summary

In chapter 11, Dude and Sister Bessie return to the Lester farm. Everyone is impressed with the new car. Sister Bessie goes into the house and waits for Dude to join her. Jeeter has to tell Dude what to do. When Dude joins Sister Bessie in the house, she marries them in a private ceremony with only the two of them. Then Sister Bessie takes Dude to bed. They are watched by Ada and Ellie May in the doorway and Jeeter at the window. In chapter 12, Jeeter goes into the room and interrupts Sister Bessie and Dude. Jeeter tells Bessie that he has decided to castrate himself in order to please God. However, he feels that he should put it off for a little while. After a while, Dude and Sister Bessie get out of bed and go for a ride in the car. Jeeter is almost jealous of his own son. Jeeter tells Ellie May that she should find a man now, making comments about her face that causes her to run off crying.

In chapter 13, Jeeter sits on the porch and thinks about planting his fields. Jeeter wants to work the land; it is in his blood, but he does not have the money to buy seed. Jeeter once turned to a loan company, but they charged so much that he ended up owing more than he made. Jeeter blames the rich people in Augusta. In chapter 14, Dude and Sister Bessie return. Jeeter notices damage to the front of the car and learns that on their way back from McCoy, Dude was so busy honking the horn that he did not see a slow moving wagon in front of them soon enough. Dude ran into the wagon and killed the black man driving it. Dude blamed the black man and left him in the ditch. At bed time, everyone went into the one bedroom where three beds waited. Sister Bessie undressed and climbed into bed, but Dude was not there. Sister Bessie and Jeeter lit a match to search for Dude, exposing Sister Bessie's naked body and upsetting Ada. They finally found Dude in Grandma Lester's bed.

Chapters 11-14 Analysis

Sister Bessie and Dude return from Fuller with the new car. Dude, exposing his immaturity, is so impressed with the horn that he honks it all the way home. Once there, Sister Bessie marries them in a private ceremony that she officiates at, leaving the reader wondering if their marriage is legal. Later, Sister Bessie attempts to consummate the marriage, but the entire family comes to watch and then Jeeter interrupts to announce that he wants to castrate himself to atone for his sexual sins. However, Jeeter wants to wait and the reader gets the distinct impression that he is attracted to Sister Bessie, a relationship that will be more than extramarital, but incestuous as well, further exploring Jeeter's lack of morals when it comes to women and family.

Dude seems to have inherited some of his father's lack of morals as well. Dude marries a woman in order to get access to her new car and kills a man in a car accident, but not only does not help the man, but he refuses to even notify anyone of the accident or get

help. This leaves the reader wondering what kind of future this family has with a father who is too lazy to make a living or to care about the emotional wellbeing of his wife or children and a son who could care less about the man he murdered and left in a ditch beside the road.



Chapters 15-17

Chapters 15-17 Summary

In chapter 15, Jeeter convinces Sister Bessie and Dude to drive him and a load of wood into Augusta to sell. Dude and Jeeter load the car with wood, nearly wrecking it when they hit an old stump, leaving only enough space for three people to sit comfortably. Ada becomes angry that they are leaving her behind. As they approach Augusta, the car begins to go really slow up a hill. Finally the car stops. Jeeter and Sister Bessie get help at a local gas station where they learn that they blew a bearing because they never put oil in the car. The man puts oil in the car and it starts again, but the man says it will never work the same again.

In chapter 16, Dude, Sister Bessie, and Jeeter spend several hours trying to sell their firewood, but it is hard blackjack and it does not burn well. No one wants to buy it. They get hungry, so Jeeter talks Sister Bessie into selling the spare tire on the car. They use some of the money to buy a hunk of cheese and crackers. After a quick meal, they decide to get a hotel room. After going to their room, the clerk comes and tells Sister Bessie they have another room for her. A few minutes later, she comes back and says someone was already in the bed. They come back for Sister Bessie again. In the morning, Sister Bessie tells them that they kept sending her to different rooms where there were other men in the beds. Sister Bessie does not seem to have minded, however. The three of them leave. Jeeter has them pull over just outside of town and he attempts to burn the wood, but it will not burn.

In chapter 17, Jeeter wants to go to Burke County to see Tom, but Sister Bessie and Dude leave before he can get into the car. When they return, Sister Bessie and Dude tell Jeeter that Tom has refused to give any money to the family and told them to never return. Ada came over and asked about Tom, but Dude and Sister Bessie begin to argue because Dude keeps using foul language. Then Jeeter begs for a ride in the car. Sister Bessie refuses, so Jeeter orders her off his land. Sister Bessie has moved into the house and does not want to leave because she has nowhere else to go. Sister Bessie grabs Jeeter and begins to beat him. Ada jumps to Jeeter's defense and they all three begin to fight. Finally Sister Bessie gets away and she and Dude drive away. As they speed out of the yard, they run over Grandma Lester.

Chapters 15-17 Analysis

Jeeter convinces Sister Bessie and Dude to take him to Augusta. The trip turns out to be a dud because they cannot sell the hardwood that Jeeter has brought. Instead, Jeeter convinces Sister Bessie to sell her spare tire. The car has already suffered several accidents and blown a bearing because Sister Bessie and Dude are not caring for it. This car has become a symbol of what happens when a person stops caring for people or possessions in their lives. The car is falling apart because Bessie and Dude

are failing to care for it. The same thing is happening to the Lester family because Jeeter and Ada are failing to care for it.

The sexual nature of some of the characters comes to light in these chapters. Sister Bessie stays a night in a hotel with two men in one room. However, despite the reader's expectations, Sister Bessie leaves the room and spends the night with various strangers. No one seems to think this is unusual, however, showing the reader how simple minded and unconcerned these characters are. Later, Sister Bessie and Dude find out that Tom no longer wants to have anything to do with the family. Jeeter is disappointed but does not seem changed by this news. However, the fact that Sister Bessie will not allow him to ride in her car again is life changing. Again the reader sees how odd and inappropriate everything in Jeeter's life really is.



Chapters 18-19

Chapters 18-19 Summary

In chapter 18, Ada and Jeeter see Grandma Lester lying on the ground after being hit by the car, but they neither try to see if she is alive nor help her get up. When Lov comes by later to tell Jeeter that Pearl has left him after he attempted to tie her to the bed, he asks about Grandma Lester, but also does nothing to help her. In fact, Lov helps Jeeter take her to a field so that he can bury her. To help with his missing wife, Jeeter suggests that he send Ellie May to care for Lov and his house until Pearl returns. Lov agrees. Jeeter tells Ellie May to try to steal some of Lov's overalls and bring them home to him.

In chapter 19, Jeeter decides to burn the fields to prepare them for planting, even though he has no money to buy seed or fertilizer. Jeeter watches the fire for a while. When the fire appears to be moving away from the house, Jeeter goes in to bed. Unfortunately, the fire changes direction and heads back toward the house. Around dawn, when the Lesters would normally be waking up, the fire encompasses the house. The house burns down around Jeeter and Ada. Lov and Ellie May come to the house along with Sister Bessie, Dude, and several of their neighbors. They take the bodies from the house and bury them. As they drive away, Dude thinks aloud that he might like to plant a crop in the fields sometime.

Chapters 18-19 Analysis

No one cares that Grandma Lester has just been run over by a car. Grandma Lester is still alive when Ada and Jeeter notice her and might have been saved, but they ignore her, leaving her there to die. Later, Lov not only ignores her injuries, but he helps Jeeter carry her to a field to bury her. The reader is left wondering if she was really dead when she was buried. This again touches on Jeeter's lack of concern for his family members.

Lov takes Ellie May home with him because Pearl has disappeared. Lov was attracted to Ellie May and was with her at the beginning of the novel, but her harelip turns him off. Now that his beautiful wife is gone, however, the deformed sister who is willing to sleep with him appears to be preferable. Finally, Jeeter gets up and does something that is like work. However, he does not make sure the fire is out before going to bed and Jeeter and Ada are killed by the fire. It is ironic that the one bit of work Jeeter actually does in the book is the one thing that kills him. The book ends with Dude repeating his father's desire to plant a crop, leaving the reader with the impression that Jeeter's lazy, inconsiderate ways will only continue into the next generation.



Characters

Jeeter Lester

Jeeter Lester is a sharecropper who no longer works the land because the man who owns the land has moved away and cut him off. Jeeter has a family but does very little to provide for them. Jeeter often blames others for his situation—blaming the land's owner for his inability to get cotton seed, blaming his son-in-law for not giving him food, and blaming his mother for eating too much. Jeeter believes that he cannot get a job in the city because the land is in his blood. Jeeter wants to continue working the land and continuously says he is about to prepare the fields, but often the spring passes too fast and Jeeter cannot plant the crop soon enough.

Jeeter is a lazy man who often plots to get money and support from others. When Jeeter's son, sixteen-year-old Dude, marries an older woman, Jeeter takes advantage of the situation by asking the woman to drive him into the city in her new car to help him sell wood. When the wood does not sell, Jeeter talks the woman into selling her spare tire for some extra money and then using the money on a hotel room rather than food or gas to get home. Jeeter also plots to convince his oldest son, who has begun a successful business in a neighboring town, to provide for the family financially and is outraged when the son refuses. Jeeter is lazy, unhappy, and determined to do as little as possible in order to survive.

Dude Lester

Dude Lester is the sixteen-year-old son of Jeeter. Dude speaks very rarely in this novel and does not seem to have much of an opinion on anything. When Sister Bessie decides she wants to marry Dude because she is attracted to his youth, Dude agrees because he likes the idea of being able to buy the new car she promises to get. Dude is too young to be attracted to Bessie sexually, and he actually hides in his grandmother's bed the first full night he is to spend with his new wife.

Dude spends most of the novel driving his wife's new car all over the country. Within a day of having bought the car, Dude runs it into the back of a wagon and kills an unfortunate black man who was driving the wagon, but Dude deludes himself into thinking the accident was somehow the black man's fault. Dude is fascinated with the horn on the car and spends most of the time he is driving using the horn. Dude appears to be as lazy as his father and in the end of the novel Dude begins to speak like his father as well, talking out loud about planting the farm in the same way his father did.

Ada Lester

Ada Lester is Jeeter's wife. Ada rarely speaks, except to complain about the lack of snuff. Ada does not worry about the lack of food, but the lack of snuff seems to really



upset her. Ada is not a faithful wife. Jeeter thinks poorly of Ada, believing her to be little more than a burden to him. However, Ada has cheated on Jeeter at least once of which the reader knows. Ada admits in her thoughts that Pearl, her youngest child, is not Jeeter's, but the child of a man who just happened to be passing through town. The reader suspects that Ada has cheated on her husband multiple times in an act of rebellion against the life he has created for her. However, Ada does not seem to be much better than her husband because she stands by and watches him mistreat his mother and their children without attempting to stop him.

Ellie May Lester

Ellie May Lester is Jeeter's eighteen-year-old daughter. Ellie May is only one of two of Jeeter's seventeen children who still lives at home. Jeeter expects Ellie May will most likely remain in his home until he dies because she has a harelip that makes her undesirable as a sexual mate. Ellie May is in love with Lov, however, and every time he comes by Ellie May makes an attempt to draw his attention to her. In fact, Ellie May seduces Lov long enough to keep his attention away from a bag of turnips that are eventually stolen by Jeeter. Ellie May ironically misses out on sure death when Lov decides to take her home with him to replace his wife, Pearl, who has run off to the city. Ellie May becomes Lov's lover, another ironic twist since Lov stated he would have married Ellie May instead of Pearl, but he did not like to look at her harelip.

Grandma Lester

Grandma Lester is Jeeter's mother. Grandma Lester is an elderly woman who is mistreated by the Lester family. Grandma is seen as another mouth to feed; therefore, they do not feed her in the hopes that she will die and stop being a burden on the family's lack of income. Grandmother Lester is too smart, however, and she manages to find food that keeps her alive. Grandma Lester is also the only one in the family who ever works on a regular basis, gathering firewood for a cook stove that is often left cold because of the lack of food in the house. Grandma Lester is hit by Bessie's car late in the novel and left to die in the dirt of the front yard. Grandma Lester is not dead when the accident first occurs, but the reader is not sure if she is dead a few hours later when Jeeter and Lov buy her.

Sister Bessie Rice Lester

Sister Bessie Rice Lester is a religious minister who lives in another sharecropper's home on the land owned by the same man who owns the Lester farm. Sister Bessie was married to an elderly man who liked to think of himself as a religious minister and Bessie picked up the calling from him. However, Bessie has no church and no followers. Bessie comes by the Lester farm and decides that God has called her to marry Dude Lester. Bessie gets a legal license from the county to marry Dude, but she performs the



ceremony herself. Bessie then attempts to consummate the marriage, but Dude is so young he has no clue what he is supposed to be doing.

Bessie is a pretty woman, except for a birth defect that has left her without a proper nose. This causes many people to think she is ugly. Bessie is sensitive about her nose. Jeeter finds Bessie attractive, but he has never attempted to seduce her because of her nose. Bessie is a highly sexual person, despite her religious calling, and finds herself enjoying a night working as a prostitute in a hotel even though she tells Jeeter and Dude that nothing happened between her and the many men she was directed to share her bed with that night. In the end, Bessie rides off into the sunset with Dude, doomed to the same fate in which Ada found herself.

Lov Bensey

Lov Bensey is a local man who works for the railroad loading the coal chute for the trains. Lov is also Jeeter's son-in-law due to his marriage to Pearl Lester. Lov comes to the Lester house complaining that his wife refuses to share a bed with him. The Lesters find it hard to feel bad for Lov, however, because he makes a great deal more money than they do and he always seems to have food. Jeeter steals a bag of turnips from Lov and eats most of them himself before sharing them with his wife and kids. Lov seems to be the only sensible character in the novel, except for the fact that sex seems to be the only thing of which Lov thinks. Lov is upset that Pearl will not sleep with him and allows himself to be distracted by Ellie May, Pearl's sister. When Pearl runs away, Lov quickly moves Ellie May into his house to replace her.

Pearl Lester Bensey

The reader never actually meets Pearl Lester Bensey in this novel, but she is the subject of every conversation between Lov and Jeeter. Pearl is twelve when she married Lov; however, Pearl refuses to sleep in Lov's bed with him. Lov becomes desperate, even attempting to tie Pearl to his bed. Pearl runs away. The reader learns that Pearl is not Jeeter's daughter, but the daughter of a man who passed through town years before. This explains to the reader why Pearl is more beautiful than any of the other Lesters. It might also explain why Pearl seems to have more gumption than the other Lesters and dreams of a good life in the city.

Tom Lester

Tom Lester is one of Jeeter's older boys. Tom left home many years ago and made a life for himself elsewhere. When Jeeter learns that Tom has a successful business in a community a few miles from the farm, he decides to visit him and ask him to help the family financially. Jeeter imagines living off of his son's generosity for the rest of his life. However, Tom refuses to help his family financially and tells them to leave him alone. It seems Tom understands his family's nature and knows not to trust what they have to say.

Captain John Harmon

Captain John Harmon owns the land where the Lester farm is located. Captain John bought the land from Jeeter and his family to help them pay off debts created by Jeeter's father. The land was once a successful tobacco plantation owned by Jeeter's grandfather but is now divided into multiple sharecropper's farms. Captain John decided some years before the novel opens that the sharecroppers were never going to make him rich, so he moved into the city. Captain John told all the stores that he would no longer pay for the things that his sharecroppers bought. However, Captain John told the Lesters and the others they could stay in the houses as long as they liked, but he would not be responsible for any repairs. Jeeter resents Captain John refusing to pay his bills and blames Captain John for his inability to make a living.



Objects/Places

Turnips

Lov stops by the Lester home with a bag of turnips in order to ask Jeeter Lester about his wife, Pearl Lester Bensey. However, Lov is distracted by Ellie May and Jeeter steals the entire bag of turnips, eating most of them himself.

Snuff

Ada begs Jeeter to buy some snuff so that she will not feel so hungry without food.

Corn Crib

Jeeter has a fear that a rat will get into his coffin if his family locks it in the corn crib, like what happened to his daddy, so he makes everyone promise they will not put him in the corn crib. It turns out there will be no reason to place Jeeter's body in the corn crib.

Blackjack

Jeeter attempts to sell blackjack, hard oak wood, as fire wood, but it does not burn well and no one will buy it.

Harelip

A harelip is a birth defect in which the lip and/or part of the mouth do not form properly. In Ellie May's case, the top lip is split, leaving her upper gum constantly exposed.

Old Ford Car

Jeeter Lester has an old Ford car that he is constantly attempting to fix up so that he can take a load of wood to town to sell.

New Ford Car

Sister Bessie buys a new Ford car in order to take her ministry on the road after she marries Dude.



Coal Chute

Lov works at the coal chute loading the chute for the trains who came by to pick up their loads.

Cotton Mill

Most of the people who have be unable to farm any longer have gone to Augusta to work in the cotton Mill, but the Lesters have chosen not to do that because the land is too important to them.

Tobacco Road

The tobacco road is a road built by Jeeter's grandfather through his plantation to move the tobacco from the fields to the river.

Fuller, Georgia

Fuller is the small town just down the tobacco road from the Lester farm.

Augusta, Georgia

Augusta, Georgia is one of the big towns located near the farm land where the Lesters live.



Themes

Inability to Adjust

The Lesters live on a piece of land that belongs to another man. They are sharecroppers, people who work the land for another person in exchange for a place to live. However, the man who owns the Lesters' home has given up on farming and moved to the city. This man has allowed the Lesters to remain on the land but has refused to make any repairs to the home or to offer the Lesters any financial assistance in order to work the land. This leaves the Lesters with land all around them but no means to get the money to buy seed and fertilizer. They have a home, but the home is falling apart around them and they also have no means by which to make repairs. The family also does not have money to buy food.

Other families left without support by the owner of the land left the area and moved to Augusta where they could get jobs in the cotton mill. The Lesters, however, have lived on this piece of land for three generations and Jeeter swears the land is in his soul. Jeeter swears every year that he will find the means to plant that spring, but somehow he never does. Jeeter barely provides for his family by selling firewood whenever he can get the car working and by stealing from friends and neighbors, like his son-in-law, Lov. Jeeter spends most of his time sitting around and thinking about how many people have let him down. Jeeter cannot adjust to the changes in his life, making inability to adjust a theme of the novel.

Futility of Life

Life requires some work from the person living it. People are expected to make a home, pay their bills, and love their family. However, the family in this novel seems to have given up on the effort life takes. Jeeter believes he was born to work the land. Jeeter's father was a bad business man and died in debt, causing Jeeter to have to sell the family land to pay off the debts. This created a situation in which Jeeter became a sharecropper to the new owner. This situation allowed Jeeter to buy cotton seed and fertilizer on credit in the local stores. However, the land's owner gave up on farming because he was not making enough money. The owner allowed Jeeter and his family to remain on the land but refuses to pay any of his expenses anymore, leaving Jeeter without the funds to buy food or seed. Rather than find a job or another way to make money, Jeeter sits on his porch and complains about the unfairness of life.

Jeeter has given up on life. Jeeter believes the land is in his soul, so he refuses to go get a job in the city. However, Jeeter does not see the point in working the fields or cutting down the pine trees to sell for firewood. Instead, Jeeter sits around and complains, occasionally attempting to sell the blackjack that is easy to cut down and does not burn. Jeeter does not care for his own mother, leaving her to starve to death in the hopes that her death will leave them with more food. Jeeter does not care about his



wife and flirts with another woman in front of her. Jeeter does not care about his daughter, as seen in the fact that he allows her to marry at age twelve. Jeeter just allows life to pass him by because he cannot live it the way he wants. When Jeeter was living it as a farmer, he clearly was not a good farmer or else the owner of the land most likely would not have moved to the city. It is for these reasons that the futility of life is a theme of the novel.

Unfulfilled Expectations

Jeeter hears that one of his sons has a successful business in a nearby town. Jeeter plots to go visit this son and ask him for money. Jeeter figures the least this son could do is give his father a little money for all the work he put into raising him. However, the reader can see that Jeeter rarely puts a great deal of work into anything. The son refuses to support his father and soon after Jeeter and his wife die when he actually attempts to prepare the fields for planting by lighting them on fire. Unfortunately, Jeeter goes to bed while the fires are still raging and they turn, burning down his house around him.

Lov has married Jeeter's beautiful, twelve-year-old daughter with the expectation that she will share his bed and give him children. Pearl sleeps on the floor on the nights when she remains in the house, but most of the time she runs away. Lov is annoyed by his wife's actions and goes to Jeeter to ask for help in dealing with her. Unfortunately, Jeeter would rather steal Lov's bag of turnips while Lov is distracted. Lov could have married Jeeter's eighteen-year-old daughter, Ellie May, who finds Lov highly attractive and is more than willing to share his bed. However, Ellie May has a hare lip that turns off Lov. Despite that fact, it is Ellie May that distracts Lov from his bag of turnips, allowing Jeeter to steal them.

Everyone in this novel seems to have expectations of one sort or another. Grandmother expects to be loved and cared for, but she is not. Lov expects his wife to share his bed, but she does not. Jeeter expects his grown son to help him financially, but the son refuses. There are lots of expectations, but it seems none of them are fulfilled, making unfulfilled expectations a theme of the novel.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel is third person. There is not one specific narrator in this novel. Instead, the novel is told through an authorial point of view in which a narrator tells the story through the eyes of some of the characters but injects his own voice into the narration from time to time. The author of this novel rarely makes comments that are clearly in the voice of the narrator, but it is clear to the reader when the author sidesteps the story line to give background.

The point of view of this novel is similar to the third person omniscient in that it tells the story through the eyes of the characters and also shares their thoughts and emotions. However, this third person point of view is different because it does not offer the intimacy an omniscient point of view might. The authorial voice often interferes, keeping a distance between the reader and the characters that is not present with the omniscient point of view. The choice of point of views works in this novel because the characters are so unpleasant that the reader does not want to share that intimacy with them.

Setting

The novel is set in Georgia. The majority of the novel takes place on the Lester farm, just off the Tobacco Road. The tobacco road is a road that was built on what was once a plantation in order to move the tobacco from the fields to the river without getting it wet or otherwise ruining its potential at market. The plantation has not existed since Jeeter's father began selling it off to pay his debts and is now a series of sharecropper's farms. The setting moves to the big city at one point when Jeeter goes there to try to sell some wood in order to buy food for his family but has no luck. The city in this brief set of scenes acts as a sort of enemy to the Lester family, a place that is filled with darkness and offers no help for the struggling family. However, the reader can see that the city is actually a place of hope that the Lester family shuns.

The setting of this novel is a rural area where there are many farms. This area is appropriate to the plot because the plot is about a sharecropper who believes he has lost the ability to farm the land. The setting offers some irony when the reader comes to learn that the sharecropper's grandfather once owned the farm and all its surrounding land, making a success of the land through the growth of tobacco. However, the main character, Jeeter Lester's, father lost the land with his debts and caused his son to become a sharecropper on the land in only two generations.



Language and Meaning

The novel is written in simple English. The characters in the novel are sharecroppers, or poor rural people; therefore, their speech is filled with slang and racial slurs. The rest of the language is spotted with language that is common to rural life in Georgia. There are no foreign words or other words that would be hard for the reader to understand. In fact, the entire novel is written in such a simple language that even the youngest readers will be able to comprehend most of its meaning.

The language of this novel is appropriate to the plot because it is simple, just like the characters that populate its pages. The setting of the novel is a rural part of the South; therefore, the language of the novel is a simple, rural language that works well with both the setting and the characters. There is some slang in the novel that might offend sensitive readers, but there are no foreign phrases that the reader will not understand. There are a few regional words that some readers might not understand, but most of these words are quickly explained in the dialogue or exposition of the novel.

Structure

The novel is divided into nineteen chapters. Each chapter is fairly short, covering only one or two scenes per chapter, some continuing a scene begun in the previous chapter. The novel is written in both exposition and dialogue. Most of the dialogue is simple and reflects the uncomplicated lives of the characters speaking it. At a few points, the exposition is written in the voice of the author as he talks about the background of the main characters, especially when he describes how the land the Lester farm is on went from the Lester plantation to a grouping of sharecropper's farms.

The novel has only one plot. The plot follows the final few days of Jeeter Lester's life. Jeeter is a sharecropper who no longer has the means to farm his land. Jeeter schemes and plots to find the money needed to provide for his family without having to go out and get a job himself. Unfortunately, none of these schemes work, and Jeeter is forced to prepare the land for planting. In doing this, however, Jeeter burns down his dilapidated house. The plot is simple, just like the novel's characters, becoming a symbol of the theme the futility of life.



Quotes

"Lov had his wife to feed and provide for, in addition to himself, and he was careful not to allow any of the Lesters to come too close to the sack of turnips." Chapter 1, pg. 1

"Ellie May continued to peer from behind the chinaberry tree, trying to attract Lov's attention." Chapter 1, pg. 10

"Jeeter picked up the inner-tube again, and tried to make the patch stick to the rubber." Chapter 2, pg. 15

"I can't get no snuff and rations, excepting once in a while when I haul a load of wood up to Augusta." Chapter 2, pg. 21

"Jeeter's reiterated and insistent plea for turnips was having less and less effect upon Lov." Chapter 3, pg. 26

"At the time Lov had married Pearl, he said he liked Ellie May more than he did her, but that he did not want to have a wife with a harelip." Chapter 3, pg. 33

"There was no church building to house Bessie's congregation, nor was there an organized band of communicants to support her." Chapter 5, pg. 58

"Jeeter did not go down to the coal chute to see Lov. Neither did he go to the house to speak to Pearl." Chapter 7, pg. 79

"It was hard to believe from her appearance that she had as much as a penny." Chapter 10, pg. 117

"The Lesters heard Dude blowing the horn far down the tobacco road long before the new automobile came within sight, and they all ran to the farthest corner of the yard, and even out into the broom-sedge, to see Dude and Bessie arrive." Chapter 11, pg. 131

"Outside, he heard a ladder scrape against the weatherboards. Jeeter had found the ladder under the crib and had brought it to the window." Chapter 11, pg. 138

"Ada went to the porch and stood there looking back at Mother Lester several minutes, then she walked inside and shut the door." Chapter 18, pg. 215

"No one mentioned the old grandmother, but Lov was glad she had been killed the day before." Chapter 19, pg. 240

Topics for Discussion

Who is Lov? Why does the novel begin with Lov but quickly begins to revolve around the Lester family? What connection does Lov have with the Lester family? Why does he come to visit them in the beginning of the novel? Does this visit have the desired effect for Lov? Why or why not? Is Lov's problem ever truly solved? Explain.

Who is Jeeter Lester? Why is he living on this farm? Who owns the farm? Who once owned the farm? How is that ironic for Jeeter? What does this change in ownership in such a short amount of time say about Jeeter and his father? What does it say for the future of the Lester family? Will things ever change for this family?

Who is Sister Bessie Rice? Why does she become focused on Dude? Why does Bessie decide to marry Dude? Is their marriage legal? Explain. Does Dude understand what marriage to Bessie means? Why did Dude agree to marry Bessie? Does Dude love Bessie? Does Bessie love Dude? What happens when Bessie, Jeeter, and Dude stay in a hotel in the city? Where does Bessie spend the night? What does this say about Bessie's character? About Bessie's morals? How is Bessie's behavior ironic when the reader considers her devotion to religion?

Who is Grandmother Lester? How does the family treat Grandmother Lester? Why? How should they treat her? How does Grandmother Lester survive? Why did Dude get into bed with Grandmother Lester when he was married to Bessie? What does this say about Dude's feelings for Bessie? For Grandmother Lester? Why does Bessie run Grandmother Lester over with the car? Why does no one help Grandmother Lester? Was Grandmother Lester dead when Jeeter buried her?

Who is Ellie May Lester? What does Ellie May do in the beginning of the novel that helps Jeeter steal the turnips? Did Ellie May do this to help Jeeter or was she really doing it for herself? What is wrong with Ellie May? Why did Lov not want to marry her? Why does Lov later take in Ellie May? Is this a love match, or does this relationship have another purpose?

Who is Pearl Lester? Who is her father? Does Jeeter know who Pearl's father is? Why or why not? What difference does her paternity make for Pearl? What does Pearl think of Lov? Is Pearl happy being married to Lov? Why does Pearl refuse to share Lov's bed? Is this something against Lov personally or does it reflect Pearl's young age?

Discuss theme. What is theme? What are some of the themes of this novel? Give some examples of each theme. Discuss how these themes predict the direction in which the plot will take. Discuss irony. Discuss how irony affects the plot of a novel. Discuss how irony comes into play with the theme of a novel. List examples of irony from this novel.