



Tobacco Road

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Characters Discussed

Jeeter Lester, a Georgia poor white, the father of seventeen, of whom twelve are surviving and two are still at home. Shiftless but always vaguely hopeful, he makes several halfhearted and futile attempts to feed himself first and his starving family afterward. He burns to death in his shack as a result of a fire he set to burn broomsedge.

Ada Lester, his wife, who shares his fate.

Dude Lester, his sixteen-year-old son, who is persuaded into marriage with a middle-aged widow by her purchase of a Ford, which subsequently runs over and kills a black man and, later, the Lesters' grandmother, both to no one's particular regret.

Bessie Lester, Dude's wife. She uses her authority as a backwoods evangelist to perform her own marriage ceremony.

Pearl Bensey, Jeeter's fifteen-year-old married daughter. After being tied to their bed by her husband, she manages to free herself and run away.

Lov Bensey, Pearl's husband. After Pearl's flight, he is advised by Jeeter to take Ellie May instead.

Ellie May Lester, Jeeter's harelippered daughter, who uses her charms to distract Lov's attention, first from his bag of turnips, then later from his marital loss.

Bibliography:

Arnold, Edwin T., ed. *Erskine Caldwell Reconsidered*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990. A series of essays about this generally underappreciated novelist dealing with both biographical and literary topics.

Cook, Sylvia Jenkins. *Erskine Caldwell and the Fiction of Poverty: The Flesh and the Spirit*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991. This study focuses on the physical and spiritual effects of poverty on Caldwell's characters. For all of their preoccupation with material reality, they aspire also to a higher purpose in life.

Devlin, James E. *Erskine Caldwell*. Boston: Twayne, 1984. An analysis of the novel's themes and techniques. Identifies Caldwell as a naturalist and the Lesters as part of a subculture. Also tries to account for the novel's seemingly contradictory combination of humor and serious social commentary.

Klevar, Harvey L. *Erskine Caldwell: A Biography*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993. Covers the writing of the novel, Caldwell's relationship with his publishers, and the influence of his father's study of the white Southern poor for *Eugenics* magazine.

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MacDonald, Scott, ed. *Critical Essays on Erskine Caldwell*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981. Includes introductions that Caldwell wrote for several of his novels, including *Tobacco Road*, as well as contemporary reviews and scholarly essays.

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