



Sample essays

Read the passage from near the end of Section 3 of *Of Mice and Men* from 'Why'nt you tell her to stay the hell home where she belongs?' to 'Slim jumped up'...'I'll get 'um myself.' Then answer the questions below.

- (a) How does Steinbeck use details and language in this passage to show how tension mounts and leads to violence, and to portray violence?
- (b) How does Steinbeck use violence and the threat of violence in the novel as a whole?

Grade C answer

(a) Steinbeck shows how the men seem to be ganging up on Curley because they don't like him. Just before this passage starts, Slim has created an example by telling Curley that he is 'God damn sick' of Curley. This encourages Carlson, who is next down in the pecking order, to join in. He also speaks angrily: 'Why'nt you tell her to stay the hell home where she belongs?' He suggests that if Curley lets her 'hang around bunk houses' it will lead to trouble.

This further insult winds Curley up, and he invites Carlson to 'step outside'. The tension builds up even more when Carlson laughs at Curley, insults him by calling him a 'punk' and 'yella as a frog belly', and threatens to kick his head off. It is the last straw for Curley when even old Candy joins in with a snide dig about Vaseline. Curley doesn't dare fight Slim or Carlson, and Candy is too old, so he takes it out on Lennie who he thinks is laughing at him.

Steinbeck uses violent words like 'slashed', 'smashed' and 'slugging' to make the fight vivid, as well as describing the blood. He also makes it seem wilder by making



George yell. He also makes us feel sorry for Lennie and his 'terror', which makes Slim get up, as if the fight is going to spread and involve all of the men.

(b) The threat of violence is present in *Of Mice and Men* really from the first moment we meet Curley. He is an uptight little man who doesn't like big men. Lennie is big, so this is a disaster waiting to happen. Even when Curley first meets George and Lennie we read that 'his hands closed into fists' and he goes 'into a slight crouch' like a boxer, which he is. Candy explains that he is 'handy', meaning he is a good boxer and has won prizes for boxing. George is worried and says to Lennie, 'You gonna have trouble with that Curley guy. I seen that kind before. He was kinda feelin' you out. He figures he's got you scared and he's gonna take a sock at you the first chance he gets.'

The big fight that eventually takes place is caused by a number of things. First, Curley's wife is a flirt, wearing make-up and fancy shoes, and Curley is jealous and always checking up on her. He get it into his head that Slim, the mule skinner, is having an affair with her, so he goes looking for Slim. Steinbeck makes us aware of this threat early on in Chapter 3, when Curley is said to 'burst into the room excitedly' asking if anyone has seen his wife. He sees Slim is not there and obviously thinks Slim is with his wife. We see again by how his shoulders 'dropped and squared' that he is getting ready for a fight, which is also why he is 'excited'.

Steinbeck leaves this whole threat hanging in the air while George tells Lennie again about the dream farm they want to have, and then Candy overhears and comes in on their plan. But the idea of the fight is still there, and so it is no surprise when it comes. It is significant that Slim is angry with Curley. He is well respected on the ranch, and a very calm, self-controlled character, and this is the only time we see him angry, so it shows that Curley is behaving in a completely out of order way and has got it wrong about Slim and his wife.

The effect of Slim being angry is that the other men feel that they can join in. First, Carlson — who is next in the pecking order — takes the opportunity to insult Curley. Curley is already tense and upset, and this makes matters worse. He warns Carlson to 'keep outa this', but this only makes Curley look more ridiculous, as Carlson laughs at him and calls him a coward ('yella as a frog belly'). When Curley attacks Lennie, it seems unfair as Lennie is just minding his own business. Steinbeck's violent verbs make the scene very dramatic, and I personally felt pleased when Lennie finally fought back and crushed Curley's hand.

Curley's wife seems quite pleased by this too, as she calls Lennie 'Machine', guessing that it was actually him who crushed Curley's hand. This probably attracts her to him, with the fatal consequence of Lennie exercising his huge strength on



her and breaking her neck. This in turn leads to the final threat of violence, which is Curley wanting to kill Lennie himself: 'I'm gonna shoot the guts outa that big bastard myself.' The language here links Curley's anger to the violence that runs through the novel.

In a way, the story of *Of Mice and Men* would not exist without violence. The fight is a big climax, and it is only a matter of time before more violence leads everything to go horribly wrong.



Grade A* answer

(a) Steinbeck handles the mounting tension in a dramatic way, hinting at the fact that he deliberately wrote the novel to be easily adapted for the stage. Immediately before the start of the passage, we see Slim angrily rebuffing the suggestion that he has been with Curley's wife, and Curley fearfully trying to appease him. This is so difficult for a man like Curley, proud, permanently tense, and feeling he has to prove himself, that his anger erupts when Carlson offers his unwanted advice.

The word 'whirled' immediately indicates Curley's quick temper, as does his threat to Carlson. When Carlson insults him further, first by laughing at him contemptuously, then by calling him a 'punk' and a coward ('yella as a frog belly'), Curley must be seething. However, even when Candy joins in with his sexually suggestive insult, referring to the rumour that Curley keeps one hand soft for his wife, he can only 'glare' at him because he knows he is outnumbered, and both Slim and Carlson are a real threat individually.

The scene is full of violent language and imagery. Curley is like a 'terrier', a small, aggressive dog. The words 'slashed', 'smashed' and 'slugging' vividly portray Curley's relentless and professionally efficient attack. Slim's angry response to this injustice also portrays Curley as an animal — a 'dirty little rat'. Poor Lennie, on the other hand, is like a helpless lamb: 'bleated with terror'. Not only do the verbs and images convey the violence in the scene: the insulting swearwords — 'God damn punk', 'big bastard', 'big son-of-a-bitch' (strong for the time when the novel was written) — are examples of verbal aggression that anticipate the physical violence.

(b) Violence is inherent in the plot of *Of Mice and Men* and in the dramatic framework within which it takes place. This is because Steinbeck is concerned with the position of the ordinary, oppressed working man, and because, in this novel, the threat of violence goes hand in hand with the possession of power. Curley is a dangerous figure because he is on the one hand the boss's son, which gives him some authority, and on the other a small man who resents bigger men so much that he feels he has to prove himself by challenging them to fight. As Candy says, 'He's all time picking scraps with big guys. Kind of like he's mad at 'em because he ain't a big guy.' There is dramatic tension in his relationship with Slim, whom he cannot fight because, as Whit says, 'Nobody knows what Slim can do.' In addition, Slim is important to the ranch and the boss would not want to fire him.

The link between power and violence is also seen with Crooks. Candy is simply showing the acceptance of racism typical in California in the 1930s when he explains that the boss takes out his anger on Crooks because he's 'a nigger', and when he laughs at the memory of the only time that Crooks was allowed in the bunk



house — and was set upon by a white man. Even Curley's wife, who has very little power on the ranch, has the power to threaten Crooks with violence: 'I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny.'

The background to the novel, as related by George to remind Lennie (and reveal it to us), is also a violent one: the two men were forced out of Weed by an angry mob prepared to believe that Lennie had attempted to rape a girl there. This sets a precedent, cleverly preparing us for the possibility of something similar happening on the ranch where George and Lennie are going to work.

Curley, too, is tense from the start. All his body language is that of a man who wants a fight: 'His arms gradually bent at the elbows and his hands closed into fists', and his glance is 'at once calculating and pugnacious'. Added to this, he is always jealously suspicious of his wife, whom he has recently married. She may not be the 'tramp' that George accuses her of being, but we are led to believe that she will be a part of George and Lennie's dream collapsing. As George says, 'There's gonna be a bad mess about her.'

This is literally a fatal combination, but Steinbeck's special power in unravelling it in the novel is in the way he makes us anticipate the outcome without making it obvious. So, when violent events occur, we have been prepared for them by the telling details. Thus the killing of Candy's dog foreshadows George's killing of Lennie. Ironically, though this seems like an act of justified violence to the insensitive Curley and Carlson, it is in fact a compassionate act. The threat of violence, then, drives the novel, and destroys George and Lennie's dream, but it does lead to a tragically inevitable ending in which George is seen to be a noble and true friend to the last.



Grade C answer (annotated)

(a) Steinbeck shows how the men seem to be ganging up on Curley because they don't like him.¹ Just before this passage starts, Slim has created an example by telling Curley that he is 'God damn sick' of Curley.² This encourages Carlson, who is next down in the pecking order, to join in. He also speaks angrily: 'Whyn't you tell her to stay the hell home where she belongs?' He suggests that if Curley lets her 'hang around bunk houses' it will lead to trouble.

This further insult winds Curley up,³ and he invites Carlson to 'step outside'. The tension builds up even more when Carlson laughs at Curley, insults him by calling him a 'punk' and 'yella as a frog belly',⁴ and threatens to kick his head off. It is the last straw for Curley when even old Candy joins in with a snide dig about Vaseline.⁵ Curley doesn't dare fight Slim or Carlson, and Candy is too old, so he takes it out on Lennie who he thinks is laughing at him.⁶

Steinbeck uses violent words like 'slashed', 'smashed' and 'slugging' to make the fight vivid, as well as describing the blood.⁷ He also makes it seem wilder by making George yell. He also makes us feel sorry for Lennie and his 'terror', which makes Slim get up, as if the fight is going to spread and involve all of the men.⁸

(b) The threat of violence is present in *Of Mice and Men* really from the first moment we meet Curley. He is an uptight little man who doesn't like big men.¹ Lennie is big, so this is a disaster waiting to happen. Even when Curley first meets George and Lennie we read that 'his hands closed into fists' and he goes 'into a slight crouch' like a boxer,² which he is. Candy explains that he is 'handy', meaning he is a good boxer and has won prizes for boxing. George is worried and says to Lennie, 'You gonna have trouble with that Curley guy. I seen that kind before. He was kinda feelin' you out. He figures he's got you scared and he's gonna take a sock at you the first chance he gets.'³

The big fight that eventually takes place is caused by a number of things. First, Curley's wife is a flirt, wearing make-up and fancy shoes, and Curley is jealous and always checking up on her.⁴ He get it into his head that Slim, the mule skinner, is having an affair with her, so he goes looking for Slim. Steinbeck makes us aware of this threat early on in Chapter 3, when Curley is said to 'burst into the

- 1 Better to say, 'because they dislike his aggressive, domineering behaviour'.
- 2 Good point, but better to say, 'Slim, who is respected by the men, has set them an example.'
- 3 More appropriate to say, 'enrages Curley'.
- 4 Explain that this means Curley is a coward, which goads him to prove that he is not.
- 5 More appropriate to say, 'with an insulting reference to the rumour that Curley is keeping one hand soft for his wife'.
- 6 This is really just retelling. Explain the irony that Lennie is just smiling about the rabbits when Curley attacks him.
- 7 Good focus on language.
- 8 An opportunity to mention Steinbeck's use of imagery: 'bleated' makes Lennie seem like a lamb, whereas Curley is a 'terrier' and 'a dirty rat'.

Overall, some good comments, but a tendency to sum up without making clear points. Also insufficient focus on actual language.

- 1 Better to say, 'He is a tense and aggressive little man who resents men who are bigger than him'.
- 2 Good use of evidence, but could call this 'body language'.
- 3 Slips into retelling without making a clear point, and the quote is unnecessarily long.
- 4 True that Curley is jealous, but it is simplistic to say his wife is a 'flirt' without evidence. Her make-up and shoes do not prove this.



room excitedly' asking if anyone has seen his wife.⁵ He sees Slim is not there and obviously thinks Slim is with his wife. We see again by how his shoulders 'dropped and squared' that he is getting ready for a fight, which is also why he is 'excited'.⁶

Steinbeck leaves this whole threat hanging in the air while George tells Lennie again about the dream farm they want to have, and then Candy overhears and comes in on their plan. But the idea of the fight is still there, and so it is no surprise when it comes.⁷ It is significant that Slim is angry with Curley. He is well respected on the ranch, and a very calm, self-controlled character, and this is the only time we see him angry, so it shows that Curley is behaving in a completely out of order way and has got it wrong about Slim and his wife.⁸

The effect of Slim being angry is that the other men feel that they can join in. First, Carlson — who is next in the pecking order — takes the opportunity to insult Curley.⁹ Curley is already tense and upset, and this makes matters worse. He warns Carlson to 'keep outa this', but this only makes Curley look more ridiculous, as Carlson laughs at him and calls him a coward ('yella as a frog belly'). When Curley attacks Lennie, it seems unfair as Lennie is just minding his own business. Steinbeck's violent verbs make the scene very dramatic, and I personally felt pleased when Lennie finally fought back and crushed Curley's hand.¹⁰

Curley's wife seems quite pleased by this too, as she calls Lennie 'Machine', guessing that it was actually him who crushed Curley's hand. This probably attracts her to him, with the fatal consequence of Lennie exercising his huge strength on her and breaking her neck.¹¹ This in turn leads to the final threat of violence, which is Curley wanting to kill Lennie himself: 'I'm gonna shoot the guts outa that big bastard myself.' The language here links Curley's anger to the violence that runs through the novel.

In a way, the story of *Of Mice and Men* would not exist without violence. The fight is a big climax, and it is only a matter of time before more violence leads everything to go horribly wrong.¹²

5 Good use of evidence for Steinbeck's use of foreshadowing.

6 More good evidence.

7 Good, but needs to be made clearer: Steinbeck lets the suspense build and prepares us for the fight so that when it comes it seems inevitable.

8 Good point about Slim. Better to say, 'This suggests that Curley's accusations are completely unjustified.'

9 Repetition from part (a).

10 Good evidence of personal engagement but better to say, 'when Curley finally got what he deserved'.

11 Hints at a good point, but a bit rushed. More explanation needed.

12 Also rushed, though the idea of inevitability is good.

Overall, a good analysis of the most obvious violence and its causes, but more is needed on the less obvious examples of violence in the novel, especially relating to Crooks, and on how violence propels the plot.



Grade A* answer (annotated)

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The word 'whirled' immediately indicates Curley's quick temper, as does his threat to Carlson.⁴ When Carlson insults him further, first by laughing at him contemptuously, then by calling him a 'punk' and a coward ('yella as a frog belly'), Curley must be seething.⁵ However, even when Candy joins in with his sexually suggestive insult, referring to the rumour that Curley keeps one hand soft for his wife,⁶ he can only 'glare' at him because he knows he is outnumbered, and both Slim and Carlson are a real threat individually.

The scene is full of violent language and imagery. Curley is like a 'terrier', a small, aggressive dog. The words 'slashed', 'smashed' and 'slugging' vividly portray Curley's relentless and professionally efficient attack. Slim's angry response to this injustice also portrays Curley as an animal — a 'dirty little rat'. Poor Lennie, on the other hand, is like a helpless lamb: 'bleated with terror'.⁷ Not only do the verbs and images convey the violence in the scene: the insulting swearwords — 'God damn punk', 'big bastard', 'big son-of-a-bitch' (strong for the time when the novel was written) — are examples of verbal aggression that anticipate the physical violence.⁸

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- 1 Relevant background knowledge.
 - 2 Puts passage in context.
 - 3 Clear explanation.
 - 4 Detailed response to language.
 - 5 Explains and shows empathy with Curley.
 - 6 Explains concisely why the insult is especially provocative.
 - 7 Good analysis of animal imagery.
 - 8 Insight into how words can represent 'violence'.
- Overall, this shows a clear awareness of context, good insight into the details of the passage, and an ability to analyse Steinbeck's language.

- 1 Insightful analysis, showing awareness of author's aims.
- 2 Neatly sums up why Curley is a threat.
- 3 Well-chosen quote as evidence.



he cannot fight because, as Whit says, 'Nobody knows what Slim can do.'⁴ In addition, Slim is important to the ranch and the boss would not want to fire him.

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4 Good evidence.

5 Good link between power, racism and violence, and awareness of cultural context.

6 Awareness of plot structure and narrative technique.

7 Textual evidence and appropriate terminology ('body language').

8 Awareness of possible interpretations.

9 Appreciation of author's technique.

10 Conclusion offers an original interpretation and avoids repetition.

This response really explores the question to the full, looking at the many instances of violence in the novel, and at its close connections to power as well as to racism. It shows a keen awareness of cultural context and the author's intentions, and of possible interpretations. It also uses relevant textual evidence. Finally, it shows how violence is essential to the structure of the novel.