

How to answer a selection of questions on *Of Mice and Men*

1. The “Animal” question

If you are asked, “Write about the ways that Steinbeck uses animals in *Of Mice and Men*”, as the AQA paper did last year, your problem is not what to write, but how to shape your essay.

I suggest that you prioritize the many uses of animals. Let’s look at a few of them. Firstly, you have the title of the novel (or, more accurately, novella, as it is shorter than a novel). This is from the poem, “To a Mouse”, by Robert Burns, how the “best laid plans o’ mice and men/ Gang aft agley”, meaning the most careful schemes go wrong. Burns is referring to a mouse whose nest he disturbed while ploughing. The most obvious interpretation of the reason Steinbeck changed the title of the book to *Of Mice and Men* (from the original *Something that Happened*) is that he is referring to the futility of George and Lennie fulfilling the American Dream (of property and liberty) because their plans will inevitably go wrong, just as the mice that fall Lennie’s way meet their doom. Interestingly, though, the seventh stanza of “To a Mouse” is about how the creature only cares for the present, while we regret our pasts and worry about our futures – that is, George’s situation at the end of the story.

Throughout the book there are many animals named, often physical, often metaphorical, often symbolic. Again and again Steinbeck strikes similes about his human characters, comparing them to animals in a significant way. For example, the two types of bear Lennie is like in Section 1 and Section 6, depicting his changed circumstances, or his weakness and similarity to Candy’s dog in the comparison between him and a terrier in Section 1, when he hands over the dead mouse to George, and in Section 3, to a puppy, during the fight with Curley.

The watersnake story, which seems to continue unbroken between Sections 1 and 6, while the events of the fatal weekend unfold, could be interpreted in more than one way. In several mythologies the heron represents death and the snake life, and so the death of the watersnake foreshadows the death of Lennie, as the death of the mouse and the puppy foreshadow the death of Curley’s wife. However, Steinbeck nods towards a couple of Biblical stories – the Easter Story and the story of the Fall of Man from the Book of Genesis. In the second of these the first man Adam is tempted by his wife Eve, who in turn has been tempted by Satan (=the Devil) in the form of a snake. For this reason mankind is banished from Paradise—the Garden of Eden—and made to suffer. So it could be that we are meant to think that by the death of the snake Lennie can find his Paradise, which is characterized by its innocence. The description of Salinas with its rabbits and deer at the opening of the book is certainly idyllic, like Paradise or the Garden of Eden.

Throughout the book there is the repeated image of restless horses – a motif – which leaves a number of impressions on the reader. This image often seems to precede an important event, except perhaps in the case of the fight, where a mule is featured. Horses are traditionally a symbol of passing time, which is perhaps another of their functions here, or they could be said to be restless because they, like the men, wish to escape the ranch. Or, like the watersnake, they could represent the recurring and unavoidable patterns of nature. They also fill the silences that seem to occur so frequently on the ranch, and form part of the theme of loneliness. And don’t forget the horses’

shoes, which symbolize the possibility of all the men on the ranch – including Crooks – being equal when they play together.

Human beings as a species also form a memorable motif which is threaded throughout the book—that of men calling to each other, an image which becomes increasingly sinister towards the end of the story when we realize that the men who are now calling to each other are those intending to kill Lennie.

2. The “Character” question

Sometimes you are asked the “Character” Question. This can be an exploration of the way a character changes over the weekend of the plot, or the relationship between two characters (e.g. George and Lennie), or an account of how a particular group of characters (minor characters, female characters, etc.) is used by Steinbeck to create meaning.

You may already have made a graph of certain characters’ fluctuating fortunes. In the cases of George, Lennie, Candy, Crooks and Curley’s wife their fortune is at its highest when they believe their ambition can be fulfilled, though none of them has shown much success in life so far. George and Lennie are wanted as suspected criminals, Crooks is isolated because he is a negro, Candy cannot reverse his age or disability and Curley’s wife has married a bully. All believe at one point that they can fulfil the American Dream of property and freedom—and stardom, in Curley’s wife’s case, the Hollywood Dream. As Steinbeck said (explaining why socialism hadn’t caught on in the U.S.), “In America the poor see themselves not as an exploited proletariat but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires.” Want an A (assuming you are on the Higher Paper)? Quoting that to the examiners would get you part way there.

If you are asked about minor characters, draw a line in the sand at the start of the essay and name them: “I intend to cover...” The true minor ones are Smitty (symbolizing the racism and brutality of the ranch), Andy Cushman (who has fuelled George’s puritanical fear of women) and Bill Tenner, the pea cultivator driver who fascinates Whit because he seems to have achieved his fifteen minutes of fame. The Girl in the Red Dress of course morphs into the Girl in the Red Mules—Curley’s wife—in the pattern of cycles and escalations which give structure to Steinbeck’s plot. If you get stuck either ramp up to Whit and the Boss, or go more minor with, say, Whitey, the blacksmith who had George’s bed before him (symbolizing the pride—but also the instability—of the working man).

Remember that there are five women of any significance in the novella (as already mentioned, it’s too long for a short story and too short for a novel, so you could give it its proper term *novella*). These are: Curley’s wife, Aunt Clara, the Girl in Weed, and the two madames (brothel keepers), the coincidentally named Clara, and Susy. All but one of these can be included in the “minor characters” version of the Character Question, but you might have to comment on female characters alone. Only three of the women speak, though Aunt Clara of course is voiced by Lennie. The prostitutes are where the ranch hands go to assuage their loneliness—a system George approves of—but at the price of not raising a stake to escape from the ranch. However, Whit does contrast the madames in a poignant, almost angel/devil fashion: Clara gives the men sexual diseases, overcharges them, is humourless, etc., while Susy is “always cracking jokes”, her “girls is clean”, and if “a guy don’t want a flop” he can just sit and drink in her “nice” chairs. Aunt Clara—forgotten by Lennie till (significantly) the fatal conversation with Curley’s wife—rises up in the final chapter as the voice of his conscience.

Finally, when you write about Curley's wife make sure to include Steinbeck's own views of her from the Miss Luce letter.

3. The "Dream" question

If you are asked about the significance of dreams in the book, remember the types of dreams the characters have. George in the first section has two dreams (or aspirations, or hopes for the future; best, as for all questions, to define your terms at the start)—the one about the "little place" that we see almost immediately he doesn't really believe in but Lennie does, plus his getting-rid-of-Lennie dream, which eventually comes true. Simple-minded to some extent like Lennie, Curley's wife tells him of her dream of Hollywood stardom, far less realizable than the dream of the ranch which (in the fourth section) she pours scorn on. George's attitude towards the possibility of land and freedom — based on an image from his childhood—can be thought to be similar to that of Crooks, who recalls the long-lost happiness of his boyhood before he offers to come in on the deal with the other three. Candy, without his only friend in the world and liable to be "canned", wants just companionship and security, while Whit seems to think that just having a letter published in a magazine would fulfil his dream. Finally, note how Lennie's dream turns into a waking nightmare (with the giant rabbit) before he is "redeemed" by George.

But the very title of the book declares that these dreams are doomed. Behind the issue of dreams lies Steinbeck's anger at the gap between the illusion that poor people have been peddled—the wish expressed by John Locke in his 1689 *Two Treatises of Government*, which gave every man property and liberty, and was taken up enthusiastically by the Founding Fathers of the U.S.A.—and the reality of life in the 1930s during the Great Depression.

3. The "Tragedy" question, and tips for answering questions in general

It is not possible to cover all the possibilities of what questions can be asked, but if you develop a detailed knowledge of those above you will have a fighting chance of a top grade. The commonest question is on loneliness, but this will be the one most covered in class. Test yourself by taking chunks of text at random, and see if you can identify where they come from in the story, and what theme, motifs and significance they contain. Again, treat the exam as "closed book", learning your quotes beforehand, because there just isn't time to go rummaging through the text.

There are two basic types of answers required by this part of the paper: one descriptive—the one suggested at the beginning of these notes—and the other argumentative. For the descriptive one you have to prioritize your ideas, ending with the most important one. For example, if you are asked, "How does Steinbeck use the theme of loneliness in *Of Mice and Men*?" you might start with the deaths of Lennie and Curley's wife, as showing the consequences of the isolation on the ranch, but end with the idea that this unnamed place with its nicknamed characters is a metaphor for the estrangement during '30s America of the working classes from the American Dream. In between these would be a consideration of the loneliness of the characters, the symbolism of the bunkhouse, the motifs of silence and nature, etc.

Last year candidates were asked if *Of Mice and Men* were a tragedy. Those who unwisely attempted the question without knowing what *tragedy* meant soon came unstuck. A tragedy is a piece of literature in which someone who has risen to greatness goes wrong, falls from their position and

usually dies, as a result of a flaw in their character. Immediately we can see what the answer is if we use this definition, but we are in this paper expected to consider alternative interpretations.

Now the best way to tackle a question like this is to set up an argument which divides the essay into three parts. The first part will be an argument which is against your own belief—this means taking a position known as “devil’s advocate”—and you start by arguing that the book is indeed a tragedy. Lennie rises to greatness by means of his own dream, but his fatal flaw causes him to kill Candy’s wife, and consequently he has to die. His victim rises to her own dream of stardom, but is killed before she can attempt it through her own character flaw. The tragedy is similarly reflected in a number of other characters—they are knocked down every time they try to stand up for themselves.

Then reverse the argument in the second part, using the magic word *however*: “However, the reality of Steinbeck’s world is that there is no opportunity for the working man or the housewife to rise to greatness, and the characters are merely chasing illusions.” These are not kings or emperors, you could say, but just ordinary people who, because of social and economic conditions can’t get off first base. This is not a tragedy in the accepted sense, but a puncturing of unrealizable ambitions. The book’s title tells us that their schemes—not for greatness, but really for self-respect—will never get off the ground.

Then you can mop up in the third part—the conclusion—by answering the question directly: no, it’s not a tragedy as the characters have nowhere to fall from, unless Steinbeck intended it to be the tragedy of America, which up to the 1929 Crash had indeed risen to greatness, but had, for reasons revealed in the brutality and isolating nature of the symbolic ranch— representing the life of Americans in general—failed its people.

4. And finally...some basic tips

- KISS: Keep it simple, stupid! Be clear in your arguments, and don’t let yourself get bogged down.
- Spell the characters’ names correctly: Curley, Lennie.
- Back up any significant point you make with a quote. Embed quotes, shortening them with ellipses: ‘Curley’s wife even plays the actress for Lennie (“...She made a small grand gesture... and her little finger stuck out grandly from the rest.”)
- Write in paragraphs. Change for topic, time, place and speaker. Use // if you forget.
- Use all available time in the exam for the questions—if you finish early it’s a probability you haven’t written enough, or have written drivel.
- Learn all quotes before the exam; keep the book next to you only in case of emergencies; think about what questions you might be asked and rehearse the arguments in your head.
- Answer only one question from Section A and one from Section B; the first question of Section A is not for you—look for the *Of Mice and Men* questions.
- If you haven’t studied it you won’t be able to write about it—stick to what you know.
- Don’t try to be funny—examiners have no sense of humour.
- Remember that in each essay you should show knowledge of the context (social, cultural, historical background), demonstrate some close analysis of text, and consider alternative interpretations.

- Don't stay up revising the night before—you're better off with less knowledge and a clear head than more knowledge and a fuddled brain. Get a good night's sleep.
- Remember that the poetry counts for more marks than the prose, so you should not spend more than 45 minutes on the *Of Mice and Men* question.

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