Sample Literary Analysis of Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*

John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* illustrates the downfall of two lonely men who have only each other to depend upon. Many of George and Lennie’s struggles come from things they cannot control, such as Lennie’s mental illness and the fact that both men are stuck in the dead-end pursuit of rural labor in 1930’s America. However, the greatest tragedy in this story comes from the simple fact that Lennie is left alone with Curley’s wife because Curley’s wife is the true villain in *Of Mice and Men*; she alone causes the trouble that leads to Lennie’s death. In his novella, Steinbeck examines the different ways that men and women express their power, and while the men in his tale rely upon the power of physical strength to assert their place in society, the women—or woman—in the story relies instead on the power of the mind and her ability to manipulate others to get her way. Ultimately, in *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck takes the position that a person can be far more damaged by manipulation than by a physical beating, and, furthermore, he shows that manipulation is unfortunately the only way for American women in 1930’s to exercise some power in their lives.

It is clear from the beginning of the story that Lennie’s greatest strength is a physical one. From the outset, Steinbeck likens him to a large animal, a bear or a horse, and his first description of Lennie notes that he “walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws” (Steinbeck 2). This description, along with the image of Lennie “snorting into the water like a horse” paints the picture of a man who is lumbering and slow, but very strong and physical in nature (3). Furthermore, it is also very clear that Lennie lacks intellectual or mental strength. Whether he is mentally ill or just very slow, Lennie is unable to handle complex reasoning, and he possesses the mind of a child, not
an adult. When his fingers make ripples on the surface of the water in the beginning of the book, he excitedly exclaims, “Look, George. Look what I done,” showing a sweet but childlike excitement about the world around him (3). In fact, his love for the feel of mice is an example of Lennie’s strong physical nature—he loves the soft feel of the fur—and his weak intellectual nature—he doesn’t understand that it is strange and unhygienic to play with a dead mouse.

Still, Lennie’s strength does come in handy, and Steinbeck uses the fight between Curley and Lennie as a way to illustrate the connection between physical strength and power in the world of conventional men. Although Curley is not exactly the smartest guy in the room, he is certainly sharper than Lennie, and he also likes to fight. In fact, when Curly first lays eyes on Lennie, “his glance was at once calculating and pugnacious,” and with these two descriptive words, Steinbeck shows that Curley possesses both mental and physical strength; he can size up a situation and “read” it well, and he is always prepared for a fight (25). However, while Lennie is not at all good at reading situations, he is much stronger than Curly, and shows this by crushing his hand until George tells him to stop. Moreover, Lennie’s physical triumph gives George and Lennie the upper hand at the ranch, and George seals this victory by threatening to reveal Curley’s loss of the fight to the other ranch hands: “If you don’t tell nobody what happened, we ain’t going to. But you jus’ tell an’ try to get this guy canned and we’ll tell ever’body, an’ then will you get the laugh” (64). In the simple world of man against man, physical strength will win out, and Curly is smart enough to know that; he will tell everyone that he got his hand caught in a machine so as to avoid the shame of having others know of his loss to Lennie.
However, the world is not made up of only men, and in the end, Lennie’s strength is no match for the manipulation of Curley’s wife. From her first appearance in the story, Curley’s wife is described as a different kind of threat, one who is all artifice and manipulation from her red lips and fingernails to her red mules, “on the insteps of which were little bouquets of red ostrich feathers” (31). Ostrich feathers have no place on a northern California ranch, and George recognizes right away that her calculating nature is going to be a danger to him and Lennie. The big, powerful man who can easily crush Curly’s hand becomes a simpering fool in the presence of Curley’s wife, and although George warns him of her “poison,” all Lennie can say is, “Gosh, she was purty” (32). George recognizes right away that Curly’s wife uses her sexuality as a way to get attention from men, but Lennie is unable to see through her manipulation as the other men are.

Therefore, even though Curley’s wife does not mean to hurt Lennie, when she engages him in their flirtatious conversation in the barn, she poses a great danger to him because her mental strength, her ability to persuade and manipulate, is more of a threat to Lennie than anything else. At first, when Curley’s wife comes into the barn, Lennie remembers George’s warnings and refuses to engage in conversation. However, she is desperate for attention and says as much when she pleads, “I get lonely. You can talk to people, but I can’t talk to nobody but Curley. Else he gets mad. How’d you like not to talk to anybody?” (87). Curley’s wife is smarter than she looks, and her use of pathos here is a sharp move. Yet, when this approach doesn’t work, she switches tactics, and tries to console Lennie about his dead puppy to soften him up. Then, “she moved closer to him and she spoke soothingly, ‘Don’t you worry about talkin’ to me’” (87). Lennie
does not stand a chance against her soothing manipulation, and even though she has no intention of hurting Lennie, Steinbeck suggests through his novella that intellectual violence is potentially more damaging than physical violence since the end results cannot sometimes heal like a broken limb or black eye. Curley’s wife lures Lennie into a situation neither she nor he can control, and they both suffer the consequences.

In the world that Steinbeck presents us, women use their intellect to hurt and manipulate more than men, and this is very likely because women quite simply lack the physical strength possessed by men and so they must find another way to assert their power in the world. Interestingly, the only other character who tries to manipulate Lennie is Crooks. Perhaps jealous of Lennie’s friendship with George, Crooks meanly suggests that George might leave him, just to hurt Lennie’s feelings. He backs off, of course, when he realizes that he may get more than he bargained for, but Steinbeck may be making an interesting parallel here: Unlike most men, but like Curley’s wife, Crooks cannot rely on his physical strength to support him in such a tough world. As a crippled black man in 1930’s America, Crooks occupies one of the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy, and as such, all he has left to him is the power of his mind, as further symbolized by his glasses and books. Crooks just may be the smartest man in Of Mice and Men, but he is also the only man who tries to manipulate Lennie. In the end, Steinbeck is saddened by the depths to which both Crooks and Curley’s wife sink; it is a harsh world where one can get ahead only by using or hurting someone else.