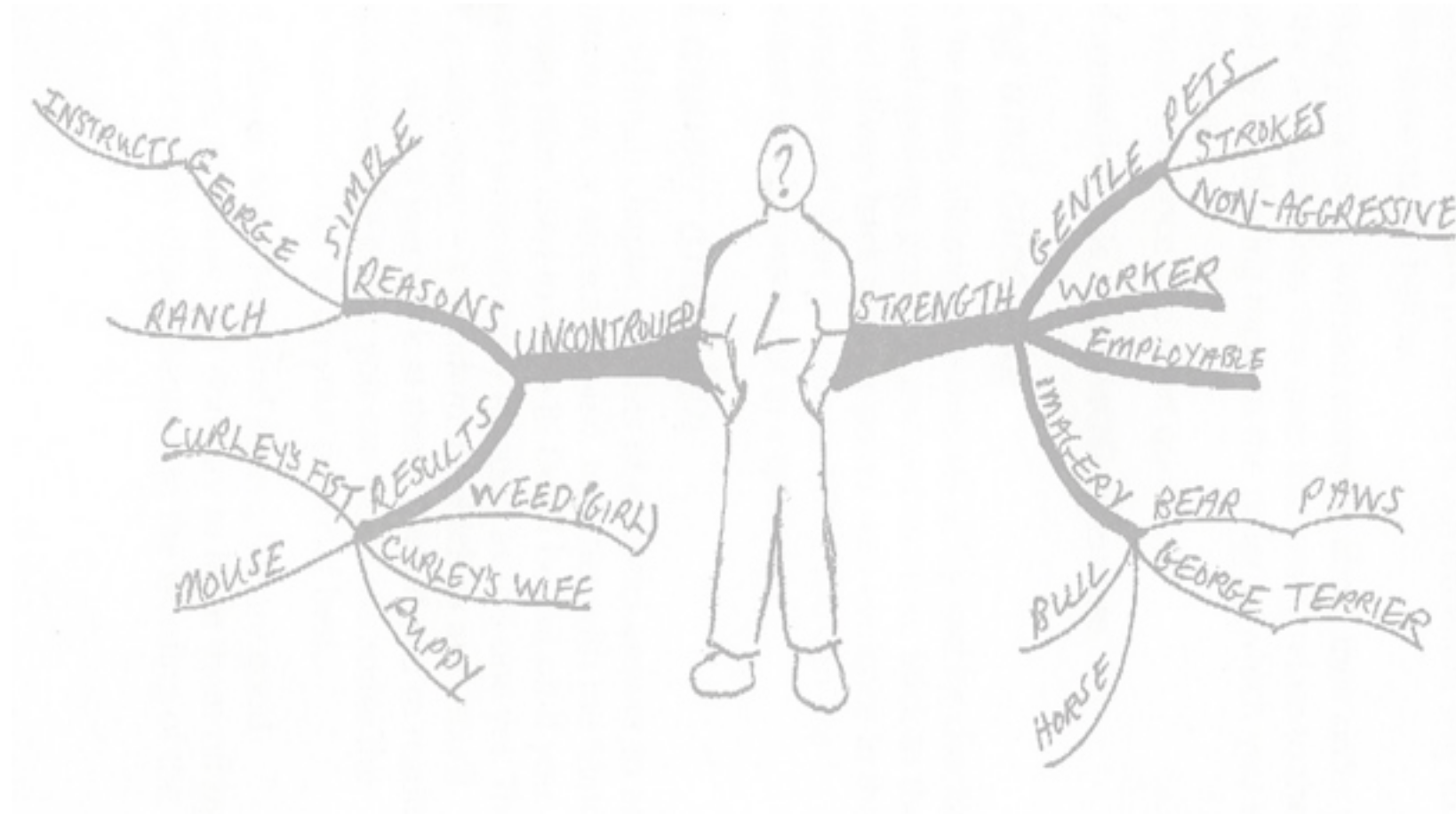


Essay question

'Lennie's worst enemy is his own strength.' How far do you agree with this statement?

A possible Mind-Map



**Essay workshop: John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men* - Lomas, 2013**

**A possible plan**

Lennie certainly strong (examples/imagery).

The part Lennie's strength plays in the development of the plot.

Strength an advantage too (getting work/self-defence).

Lack of control over strength.

Brutality not intentional (except imaginary cats).

Hostile world/ranch conditions.

Problem of not letting go (examples).

Conclusion. Real problem lack of control over strength.

### An example of a possible response

Ironically, Lennie Small is a gentle giant. He possesses an almost superhuman strength which ultimately leads to tragedy. We first read about Lennie's great strength in the opening scene when he has probably accidentally killed the pet mouse he has in his pocket. We are soon told that it is not the first time Lennie has killed pets. During the same scene, Steinbeck compares him to a bear and a horse, both strong animals. This imagery of Lennie as an animal continues. He is also compared to a terrier which suggests that he is a faithful and loyal companion to George.<sup>1</sup>

Steinbeck makes his characters pick up the animal references too. When George tells the boss that Lennie is: 'Strong as a bull', Lennie repeats the statement. The repetition has the effect of again giving the reader clues that Lennie's strength will be significant to the development of the story.<sup>2</sup> Steinbeck fully develops the animal comparison at the end by drawing a parallel between Candy and his no longer useful old dog, and George as the master of the dog-like Lennie, who can no longer be useful after he has accidentally killed Curley's wife.<sup>3</sup>

All the other characters witness Lennie's strength sooner or later. George mentions it frequently and Slim says: 'I never seen such a worker. He damn near killed his partner buckin' barley. There ain't nobody can keep up with him. God Almighty, I never seen such a strong guy.'<sup>4</sup>

Demonstrations of Lennie's strength continue with details of the incident in Weed when Lennie is accused of assaulting a girl, which we do not witness, the mangling of Curley's fist, and the accidental killing of both the puppy and Curley's wife.<sup>5</sup>

There are times when Lennie's strength is a positive advantage, however, and if harnessed appropriately, which George attempts to do as much as he can, it is a virtue. As long as Lennie keeps quiet at interviews and lets George do the talking, he makes an excellent impression as a worker, and probably contributes greatly to ensuring that the pair continue to find work during a period of very high unemployment during the American Depression. He is also able to defend himself, which George calls upon him to do when Curley

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<sup>1</sup> Awareness of literary devices.

<sup>2</sup> Awareness of reader response.

<sup>3</sup> Awareness of structure.

<sup>4</sup> Apt quotation.

<sup>5</sup> Shows firm grasp of question.

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attacks him for no real reason. Sadly, this could be a useful attribute to have in places where many unhappy men are cooped up together with few opportunities to take a break from each other.<sup>6</sup>

The problem of Lennie's strength, therefore, is his lack of ability to control it, and it is important not to overlook that Lennie's brutal actions are never intentional. As Slim notices: 'He ain't mean. I can see Lennie ain't a bit mean.' And as Lennie says to George: 'I don't want no trouble... Don't let him sock me, George.'<sup>7</sup>

Lennie's endearing qualities and lack of aggression are never better demonstrated than when George tells Lennie that should Curley try to fight him, he should 'let 'im have it', and Lennie replies: 'Let 'im have what, George?' If Lennie had Curley's mean temperament, he really would be dangerous. Only when the dream of living off the fat of the land seems realisable does Lennie show any signs of aggression. Even then the objects of his anger are 'imaginary cats' that could threaten 'imaginary rabbits'.<sup>8</sup>

Lennie's lack of control over his own strength would probably be limited to the harm he innocently inflicts on his pets if he lived and worked in more sympathetic surroundings, but the ranch is a hostile place, full of desperate characters, where inequalities of power and prosperity are very apparent, and exploited. If Curley and his father, the boss, were kinder people, and if Curley treated his wife with the respect he should show towards her, the tragic conclusion would not occur.<sup>9</sup>

Against this background Lennie likes to touch and pet soft things, and each of the three times when it really matters he becomes frightened and won't let go. At Weed he touches a girl's dress and she misunderstands his simple intentions. When Curley bullies him he crushes his fist, instead of warning Curley off with less pressure because he gets scared and cannot let go. The final tragic incident is triggered by Curley's wife offering him her hair to touch, and her panicked reaction to his grip on it.

If Lennie existed in real life today, he would be cared for in a sheltered environment where he might learn to manage his strength or where his opportunities to exercise it would be limited. On the face of it, therefore, his strength is his downfall, but the real problem is his lack of control over it within a hostile world.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Good points well argued.

<sup>7</sup> Understanding of character.

<sup>8</sup> Thorough knowledge of text.

<sup>9</sup> Understanding of background and relationships.

<sup>10</sup> Perceptive, gives clear answer to question.