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Power Struggle: Violent Imagery in *Of Mice and Men*

“Crash!” This sound often evokes anxiety and fear in those hearing it, because it is often associated with harm or violence. However, for those perpetrating this sound, it can be a symbol of great power. This is a sound that is all too familiar to those who have read Steinbeck’s novella, *Of Mice and Men.* Written during the Great Depression, a time of great desperation and struggle for power, *Of Mice and Men* has merited critical acclaim, winning the Nobel Prize for literature. In this novella, the author, John Steinbeck, often described as a modern Realist or a Naturalist, explores the hierarchy of power in a world filled with economic and moral decay, painting a vivid picture of the lengths people are willing to go to in order to gain such power (Ross 433). Steinbeck’s use of violent imagery in *Of Mice and Men* conveys the motif of power throughout the novel.

The motif of power is reinforced through the violent imagery displayed in Steinbeck’s description of Curley’s brutality towards Lennie. When all else fails, the character Curley resorts to demonstrating his power and dominance, as the boss of the ranch, through his violence towards what he considers to be the weakest link. In this scenario, Curley is made a laughing stock by his employees. Instead of confronting the original antagonist, Curley decides to validate his dominance by violently confronting the mentally challenged Lennie.

“What the hell you laughing at?” Lennie looked blankly at him. “Huh?” The Curley’s rage exploded. “Come on, ya big bastard. Get on your feet. No big son-of-a-bitch is gonna laugh at me. I’ll show you who’s yella….” He slashed at Lennie with his left, and then smashed down his nose with his right. Lennie gave a cry of a terrior. Blood welled from his nose…Lennie covered his face with his huge paws and bleated with terror…Then Curley attacked his stomach and cut off his wind…Curley slashed at his eyes. The big face was covered with blood. (Steinbeck 69)

The imagery of Lennie’s dog-like behavior solidifies Lennie as a powerless subordinate, unable to defend himself and dependent on the mercy of his “master.” Along those lines, the imagery of Lennie’s blood soaked face furthers his inferiority by detracting from his dignity, leaving the reader with an image of a weak and powerless blood-stained brute.

On the other hand, though Lennie is dominated by Curley, he consequently enhances the motif of power through the imagery of his killing of Curley’s wife: “Even the weak characters in the pecking order inherit the brutality of the regime they have had to endure” (Reith 2). Powerless and isolated, Lennie derives pleasure from petting soft animals. When the nameless Curley’s wife is presented as a subjugated, less than human figure, she takes on the animalistic characteristics by which Lennie is drawn to. According to Reith, “Curly’s wife is denied the dignity of a name, and is described as a tart and a lulu, the same name given to Slim’s dog” (Reith 3). When Lennie is denied his simple pleasure from a subjugated women, who is seen as no better than a dog, he displays his dominance by forcing her to be petted. When she resists, he displays his dominance by snapping her neck. Steinbeck describes, “she continued to struggle, and her eyes were wild with terror. He shook her then, and he was angry with her. ..and he shook her…her body flopped like a fish…Lennie had broken her neck” (Steinbeck 100). Once again, Steinbeck uses animal imagery to convey the motif of power. The image of Curley’s wife’s body “flopping like a fish” denotes her weakness in the hands of the powerful brute, like a struggling fish in the hands of a terrible beast (Steinbeck 100). Moreover, Steinbeck continues his motif of power, and Curly’s wife’s lack thereof, through the imagery of her indecent and improper burial: “Curley’s wife lay on her back, and she was half covered with hay” (Steinbeck 101). Clearly, this image portrays a lifeless and powerless woman with no name in life and death.

However, even though Lennie asserts his dominance over Curley’s wife through her murder, Steinbeck solidifies the motif of power through the violent imagery of Lennie’s murder by George. Steinbeck paints a picture of the character George killing the character Lennie with ease. Though Lennie is more powerful than George in sheer strength, George surpasses Lennie in intellect. In addition, George’s power over Lennie is enhanced by the cool and calculating image of George holding a gun: “And George raised the gun and steadied it, and he brought the muzzle of it close to the back of Lennie’s head” (Steinbeck 117). Lennie is blind to George’s intentions, as he is given a subordinate position of kneeling with his back turned to the dominant character. The spacial juxtaposition of these characters reinforce the “the naturalistic ideas” which “have done much to determine the character of the fiction which he (Steinbeck) writes” (Ross 433). The character with the greatest power will survive, and the powerless will quickly die off in the end.

Steinbeck further develops the ease in which George takes the life of another human being through the description of George’s calm demeanor: “his face set and hand steadied. He pulled the trigger” (Steinbeck 117). Furthermore, the auditory imagery of the rolling echoing crash of the gunshot juxtaposed with the instantaneous death of Lennie reinforces the motif of power by demonstrating how quickly George could take the life of his companion:

“The crash of the shot rolled up the hills and rolled down again. Lennie jarred, and then settled slowly forward to the sand, and he lay without quivering” (Steinbeck 117). Taking the life of another human being, without the slightest hesitation, is the ultimate assertion of power and, many would argue, is the greatest exemplification of the motif of power in the novel.

In final analysis, one can clearly observe that Steinbeck’s reflection of the motif of power in *Of Mice and Men* is supported by the violent imagery found throughout the novel. Characters such as Curley, Lennie, and George display their dominance through brutality and murder. Sadly, characters lacking power meet their Naturalist fate of death on the end. In *Of Mice and Men*,“the dream of independence and self-sufficiency…does indeed turn out to be ‘destructive and fatal’” (Marsden 1). Through the understanding of motifs in literature, one can become empowered to change his/her fate and ultimately survive in a harsh and brutal society.

Works Cited

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