Violence: A Painful Scourge

"I'm gonna shoot the guts outa that big bastard [Lennie] myself, even if I only got one hand. I'm gonna get 'im." (Steinbeck 98).

In this passage, Curley, the boss's son, expresses his animosity toward Lennie Small, a gentle field hand. Lennie has just unintentionally killed Curley's wife. Curley cannot see beyond his blind hatred to understand that Lennie's actions are never meant to be harmful. Curley focuses only on his desire to intimidate anyone who crosses his path. He cannot even realize that he causes most of his own misfortunes. In doing so, Curley harms himself and those around him. In John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men, violence damages the characters' lives.

Lennie uses violence unknowingly. Although he is a kind man, Lennie always seems to find himself at the wrong place at the wrong time. Lennie's first trouble occurs in Weed, the town where he and George worked before Soledad. Even though he began with good intentions, the end result was bad. Because Lennie is attracted to bright objects, he accidentally frightens a girl when he grabs her dress. Lennie's gentle nature is also demonstrated when he attempts to carefully handle small animals such as mice and puppies. No matter how hard he tries though, Lennie always accidentally crushes the animals. He tries to be gentle with the puppies and mice, but his size and strength ruins his good intentions. Although Lennie is a very large man, his nature is very gentle.

Lennie also comes into conflict with Curley's wife. Even though George castigates Lennie for speaking to her, Lennie seems to be attracted to her. George instructs Lennie,
“‘Don’t you even take a look at that bitch. I don’t care what she says and what she does.’”

(Steinbeck 32) George senses that Curley’s wife wants to get Lennie in trouble, but she really just wants someone to talk to. She figures that Lennie is harmless enough.

Naturally Lennie disobeys George and converses with Curley’s wife in the barn. After she tells Lennie to feel her soft hair, he becomes flustered and will not release her. Using his brute strength, Lennie snaps her neck. His impulse to touch soft materials once again gets him in trouble, but this time it costs him his life.

George and Carlson use violence to aid others. Carlson desires to kill Candy’s old dog. He cannot stand the manner in which it sits in the corner so miserable all day. Unlike Curley, Carlson excuses his violence with good intentions. Carlson’s good intentions do not help the situation because the death of the dog has a negative effect on Candy. Candy feels that he and his dog share the same fate. When the boss has no more use for Candy, he will put Candy away like his dog. Carlson also faces a similar situation when he and the others must retrieve Lennie. Carlson intends to shoot Lennie when he finds him, but not willingly. Carlson understands Lennie’s situation, yet he wants to put Lennie out of his misery. Perhaps the most difficult act of violence any character must carry out is that in which George kills Lennie. He knows that a piece of him will die with Lennie, but George also knows that Lennie’s life will not be free should he live. As soon as George murders Lennie, he knows that his dream of owning a farm is dead. The only person who understands George’s actions is Slim. “‘You hadda, George. I swear you hadda’” (Steinbeck 107) says Slim. With George’s dreams crushed, he returns to the farm with his dreams crushed and his closest friend lost.
Curley utilizes violence to scare those around him. He feels important when others submit to his wishes. Curley especially takes advantage of the opportunity to terrify newcomers on the ranch. When George and Lennie arrived, Curley “passed over the new men and he stopped. He glanced coldly at George and then at Lennie…[and]…His glance was at once calculating and pugnacious” (Steinbeck 25). He attempts to be intimidating for his first impression on the two newcomers. Curley only creates feelings of hate and a false sense of power over the other workers. Later, Curley has a rather painful confrontation with Lennie. Had it not been for Curley’s provocative punches, Lennie would not have literally crushed Curley’s hand. Because of Curley’s actions, both he and Lennie are injured. When Slim threatens to exploit the incident of Curley’s beating, Curley’s pride prevents him from informing his father. After Lennie inadvertently murders Curley’s wife, Curley has the intentions of brutally killing Lennie. Ignoring his broken arm, and more importantly, his dead wife, Curley sets out to shoot for Lennie’s guts. Had George not killed Lennie prior to Curley’s arrival, Curley would not have hesitated in shooting him. Curley’s actions and overall attitude contribute to other characters’ disrespectful opinions of him. Curley harms others physically and mentally more than any other character.

In *Of Mice and Men*, John Steinbeck demonstrates that violence causes harm to all people. His book suggests no good can ever come from violence. Steinbeck’s world is one of injustice and cruelty. His environment is rather pessimistic, focusing on all the evils in life. Steinbeck focuses strongly on violence, as demonstrated in the novel. Violence, whether used unknowingly, to help others, or simply for fun, is a destructive force.