Tragedy in Of Mice and Men

Definition of tragedy:

In Literature the tragic hero of a novel or play is that of a major character who has many noble features but whose personality has a flaw that will eventually bring about their downfall. Lennie certainly seems to fit into this definition. He is a hard worker and a good and loyal friend whose flaw is his inability to express his temper in the correct way. His anger stems from not wanting to get into trouble and is made deadly by his formidable strength.

Some questions to consider:

How far is the novel a tragedy?

How far is the novel symbolic of what was happening in America in the 1930’s – and, therefore how far is it symbolic of the tragedy that was the Great Depression?

How far is the ending of the novel inevitable?

What do you think is a tragedy?

Who are the tragic characters in the novel?

Lennie:

When George reveals in his conversation with Slim exactly what happened in Weed, Lennie’s final act becomes an inevitable part of the plot and the reader is made aware what Lennie is capable of. Clues that build up to the final scenes are the killing of the mouse and the puppy. There is a progression in the level of violence Lennie shows towards the things he has been allowed to look after – he kicks the puppy across the barn when he realises that it is dead.

In the sense that Lennie’s life is not a long one can be viewed as tragic. Perhaps it is the manner of his death that makes us see him in a more tragic light. George has to shoot Lennie – there can be no other outcome after the death of Curley’s wife. The commonly held view is that it is the right thing for George to do. It is, however, worth spending a little time thinking about what would have happened to Lennie if George had not shot him.

Is George also a tragic figure?

George is fairly typical of many of the ranch workers at the time and the relationship is one of co-dependence, rather than one of them getting more out of the relationship than the other. Lennie gives George’s life a purpose and a reason to carry on. Without Lennie, George’s life will be far emptier and have less focus and purpose to it. Therefore, it could be said that George is a tragic
figure and his life becomes part of the greater tragedy of the novel. There is also something to be said about the tragedy of the lack of care for people such as Lennie in America at the time – the alternative for him would be to be institutionalised – something which would, perhaps, be worse than the life he actually had.

Curley's wife:

Again, a character who is the victim of her own circumstances and those in the country at the time.

She is a young and vulnerable girl who has been taken in by the flirting and flattery of a man who said he was ‘in the movie business’. She marries Curley on the rebound from this because it seemed like a good idea to her. He is a bully and a thug who makes her life a misery. He has no thought or care for what it might actually be like to be living in the completely male environment of the ranch. She is a lonely and isolated figure and one of the outsiders who appear in the novel. Her death brings to an end a very short life that seems to have been largely unhappy. Her dreams were thwarted from the outset and she is representative of a generation of young women dreaming of escape from their dreary lives into the magical world of the movies, which in the 1930's was an industry that had revolutionised the lives of normal Americans in terms of giving them a temporary escape into another world. This was an industry in its infancy. Most of the films produced at the times were ones about escaping from reality – they were about offering entertainment in the form of escapism rather than reflecting the grim reality of people’s lives. A good example to help illustrate this is the fact that The Wizard of Oz was one of the biggest movies of that decade.

There is a sad inevitability about the death of Curley’s wife, in the same way that there is about Lennie. From the first time the reader encounters her in the doorway of the bunkhouse, and she is described by George as ‘jailbait’, we suspect that all will not end well for her and the collision course for her and Lennie swings into motion.

Part of the overall tragedy of the novel is the way in which a whole generation of Americans had their dreams destroyed during the financial hardships of the Great Depression. This was a generation of young men who would never have enough money to settle down, marry and have a family. They would never have enough money to buy a place to live. Many of them lived in the cars they used to get from ranch to ranch. Wages were piteously low – there were always other men willing to do the job for less if anyone objected. There were no worker’s rights and hiring and firing took place on the whim of the ranch owners. The fact that most towns in the area had ‘cat – houses’ or brothels is important as they are an indicator of the lack of lasting relationships in the lives of the men.

Another tragedy to explore is that of what has become known as ‘the American Dream’. This is the commonly held view that in America anything is available to anyone who is willing to work hard. Equality of opportunity is important in this dream and the idea is that in a fair society everyone should have the same opportunities. Many of the men in the novel did work hard but the basics of life were still far beyond them. Think about the conversation between George, Lennie and Candy about getting a place to live and a small piece of land. They work out they can do it together but it is worth noting that it will take the wages of three men in order for their dream to become reality – what hope would there be for a man to marry and start a family? The idea of the ‘American Dream’ seems rather ironic when looked at in this context.
Crooks

He is a tragic figure who represents the tragedy of racism in America. Slavery had come to an end in the 1860s so 50 years or so before the novel is set. It is tragic that the treatment of African-Americans had not changed hugely in the intervening years. Crooks is routinely subjected to racist abuse and harsh treatment. Evidence of this is in the way that he is referred to as ‘nigger’ and has to sleep in the stable with the horses rather than in the bunkhouse with the other men. Slavery may have been abolished but the attitudes inherent in it had not really changed at all and, in fact did not begin to change for another 20 years after the events of the novel. There is great irony in the fact that Crooks is one of the few people on the ranch who can actually read.

Candy

The tragedy of Candy is twofold - what he is and what he represents. He is a rather frail and obviously lonely old man who has spent his years working on ranches. He is kept on at the Tyler family ranch because of an injury to his hand. He does the most menial jobs on the ranch such as cleaning out the bunkhouse toilets – a fact referred to when he is described as ‘the old swamper’. It is tragic in the sense that no-one should have to spend their twilight years in this way. It is demeaning and degrading.

Candy represents what will happen to all of the young men if their circumstances do not change. His character serves as a warning to all of them that they too will end up like him and there is very little they can do to avoid it.