

Candidate Style Answers

OCR GCSE English

Unit A641 Reading Literary Texts; Controlled Assessment Task

This Support Material booklet is designed to accompany the OCR GCSE English specification for teaching from September 2010.

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Introduction

OCR has produced these candidate style answers to support teachers in interpreting the assessment criteria for the new GCSE specifications and to bridge the gap between new specification release and availability of exemplar candidate work.

This content has been produced by subject experts, with the input of Chairs of Examiners, to illustrate how the sample assessment questions might be answered and provide some commentary on what factors contribute to an overall grading. The candidate style answers are not written in a way that is intended to replicate student work but to demonstrate what a “good” or “excellent” response might include, supported by examiner commentary and conclusions.

As these responses have not been through full moderation and do not replicate student work, they have not been graded and are instead, banded “middle” or “high” to give an indication of the level of each response.

Please note that this resource is provided for advice and guidance only and does not in any way constitute an indication of grade boundaries or endorsed answers.

Unit A641 Reading Literary Texts

Controlled Assessment Task

Question

How does John Steinbeck show the influence of ranch life on the behaviour of characters in chapter two and elsewhere in the novel?

Candidate A

Steinbeck's stark description of the bunk-house at the start of chapter two immediately signals that these are men who only have time for simple pleasures.

"In the middle of the room stood a big square table littered with playing cards, and around it were grouped boxes for the players to sit on."

This might suggest that the ranch hands enjoyed comradeship, however this is far from the truth, it is the competitiveness of ranch life and operating in isolation that marks their existence as they move from farm to farm in search of a means of survival in the Great Depression of the 1930's.

In this competitive world, the stable buck, Crooks, suffers from extreme racism as the men take out their frustration on him. As Candy states,

"The boss gives him hell when he's mad."

The ranch hands are more than ready to victimise Crooks as they pass their misery on to him for a moment's sense of superiority. Certainly there is little trust in this environment. George is questioned regarding his guardianship of Lennie. The `boss` states,

"What stake you got in this guy? You taking his pay away from him?"

He fails to see that one human being could be so devoted to looking after the interests of another. Ranch life leads to callousness and suspicion. This view is supported by Candy,

"A guy on a ranch don't never listen nor he don't ask no questions."

underlining the overt protectiveness of their own interests and the intimidating atmosphere that they all conspire to maintain. As Slim states,

"Maybe ever'body in the whole damn world is scared of each other."

Steinbeck makes it clear that a clear `pecking order` is evident on the ranch, exemplified by the aggressive Curley who feels he can intimidate Lennie and George because he is the son of the boss. He stares at Lennie and states,

"Well, nex' time you answer when you're spoke to."

As physical strength is celebrated at the ranch, Curley feels that he can use his boxing skills to threaten others, particularly those he sees as `weaker` than himself. In this male stronghold `might is right`. Interestingly this character keeps a gloved hand full of Vaseline `soft` for his new wife, alluding to the hard work hands normally do on the farm. Moreover, Candy comments on the new wife's provocative `eyeing` of other ranch hands,

"She put her hands behind her back and leaned against the door-frame so that her body was thrown forward."

Here is a sole female using her charms to gain the attention of men deprived of female company in their search for work across a financially ravaged country.

In the rest of the novel it is made clear that men would dream of securing a stake to buy their own farm, as do George and Lennie. However, Steinbeck leaves the reader in no doubt that too often the boredom of ranch life would result in visits to the local whore-house and drinking binges that destroyed any prospect of earning their way out of this miserable lifestyle.

George makes the impact of ranch life on men very clear.

"They don't have no fun. After a long time they get mean. They get wantin' to fight all the time."

Steinbeck indicates that here men return to their baser instincts. Even the victimised Crooks, who retreats into his own little space to make himself invisible to the scorn of others,

"Crooks had reduced himself to nothing."

cannot resist the pleasure in being mean to Lennie.

"Nobody never gets to heaven, an' nobody gets no land."

Interestingly, having scorned George and Lennie's dream, the alternative presented by the harsh realities of ranch life causes Crooks to plead to be a part of their dream.

"If you ... guys would want a hand to work for nothing - just his keep, why I'd come an' lend a hand."

Similarly, Curley's wife is so lonely that she too dreams of what could have been in the face of the grim reality of ranch life.

"Coulda been in the movies, an' had nice clothes - all them nice clothes like they wear."

The death of this character at the hands of Lennie ends all their dreams. The desire for immediate retribution from the ranch workers leads George to end the life of his friend painlessly, for the others would have demanded a more brutal death, typical of their aggressive world, from the simple minded Lennie.

"The hand shook violently, but his face set and his hand steadied. He pulled the trigger."

Steinbeck's understated description of Lennie's death highlights its tragedy. Ranch life had claimed another victim.

Commentary

This cogent and explicitly relevant response explores and evaluates a range of interpretations of language and structure. There is detailed analysis of the writer's perspective enhanced by precise quotations. The understanding of the social, cultural and historical context is successfully interwoven into the presentation of ideas. A good higher response.

Candidate B

Steinbeck's description of the bunk-house at the beginning of chapter two reveals that the ranch workers only have time for simple pleasures.

"In the middle of the room stood a big square table littered with playing cards."

The lack of personal possessions shows that there was little time for making themselves presentable, they worked long hours. The Western magazine showed that they liked to read about men like themselves but in a glorified way.

There is a lot of competition going on with Crooks at the bottom of the pile because of racism - he is black.

"The boss gives him hell when he's mad."

Crooks is verbally abused by the other ranch workers as they find pleasure in victimising somebody worse off than themselves. We can see that racism was very much part of ranch life.

Because nobody else has a friend, the others are not sure about George and Lennie. They accuse George of ripping Lennie off. The boss states,

"What stake you got in that guy? You takin' his pay away from him?"

He does not believe that one person could be bothered to look after another. Candy feels the same,

"A guy on a ranch don't never listen nor he don't ask no questions."

They keep themselves to themselves, they are frightened of opening up. Slim points out.

"Maybe ever'body in the whole damn world is scared of each other."

The workers are always challenging each other for importance. Curley can be horrible to Lennie because he is the son of the boss.

"Well, nex' time you answer when you're spoke to."

Steinbeck shows that how strong you are is important because this is how blokes are when there are few women around.

The one woman in the story, Curley's wife, is keen to let the men see her charms.

"She put her hands behind her back and leaned against the door-frame, so that her body was thrown forward."

She knows she will get a reaction from men who have not seen their wives for a long time because they are travelling.

In the rest of the novel Steinbeck reveals how men spend time dreaming about getting out of this way of life, but they often waste their money in brothels and drinking too much to forget their unhappiness. George tells us they also fight.

"They don't have no fun. After a long time they get mean. They get wantin' to fight all the time."

Even Crooks is mean to Lennie when he says,

"Nobody never gets to heaven, an' nobody gets no land."

This is cruel when you think about how horrid the others are to him. At times Crooks has to almost disappear.

"Crooks had reduced himself to nothing."

He still wants to be part of George and Lennie's dream because he has nothing else.

"If you guys would want a hand to work for nothing - just his keep, why I'd come an' lend a hand."

Curley's wife would like to have escaped the misery of being the only woman on the ranch.

"Coulda been in the movies, an' had nice clothes - all them nice clothes like they wear."

When Lennie kills her it is all over. The workers want to make Lennie suffer for what he has done because that is what ranch life makes them believe, but George gets there first.

"The hand shook violently, but his face set and his hand steadied. He pulled the trigger."

It was all he could do to protect his friend.

Commentary

This is a personal and generally persuasive response that understands how meaning is conveyed. The quotations justify the views of the candidate and there is some awareness of how the social, cultural and historical contexts affect the reader. A good middle response.