

Show how John Steinbeck uses the character of Curley to highlight some aspects of American society in the 1930s.
[20 marks]

Life in 1930s America was bleak for all members of society. The Great Depression caused widespread unemployment – with around 13-15 million people finding themselves unemployed overnight. Following the collapse of the banks, many more lost their entire life savings. Unsurprisingly, many Americans were plunged into extreme poverty, with houses being repossessed and families struggling to put food on their tables. The impact of the Great Depression was even felt in rural areas of the country, with farmers also having to deal with the impact of the Dust Bowl. As the Dust Bowl swept across dozens of states in America, farmland was destroyed, meaning farmers could no longer grow crops. These factors resulted in many millions of people (around 3 million in total) traveling hundreds of miles to California in search of a better life and their shot at the ‘American Dream’. Unfortunately, California was suffering in the same way so working opportunities were scarce. A ‘survival of the fittest mentality found its way into American culture, as people were exploit any advantage they could over their fellow man. This resulted in the worst aspects of society prevailing at the time with all types of discrimination evident – examples of ageism, sexism, and discrimination against those with mental disabilities contained within the novella reflective of life in 1930s America at the time. Curley is an example of the worst parts of society at the time, as he intimidates and bullies those on the ranch to demonstrate the power that his position, as the boss’s son, gives him over others. Curley represents key themes from the book including the predatory nature of human existence, fear, and violence.

Curley clearly represents the predatory nature of human existence, as shown by the way he interacts with Lennie. When he says ‘nex time you answer when you’re spoken to’, Curley is demonstrating his usual aggressive, belligerent, and confrontational personality traits against a person that he perceives to be weak. As with many people in 1930s America, Curley is happy to take advantage of those with a mental disability, and for this reason, sees Lennie as an easy target. The fact that Curley doesn’t need to gain any advantage over Lennie, given his dad owns the ranch, shows that his actions are simply cruel. When his hand is crushed by Lennie following their confrontation, Curley is more comfortable to never speak of the incident than have his fragile ego damaged. Steinbeck gives the impression that Curley has not learnt the error of his ways, more that he is detstined to repeat the same mistakes again. Curley, in this regard, is a product of a society that is determined to exert influence and power over the less vulnerable, sometimes to gain an advantage; often for mere sport. This demonstrates the impact that a desperate society can have on a person, as his pugnacious approach to others on the ranch reflects how people treated each other at the time.

Steinbeck uses Curley to present the theme of fear. As well as being trapped in a loveless marriage, there is a feeling that Curley's wife fears her husband. When she hears that her husband has been looking for her in Chapter 2 for example, she makes her excuses and quickly leaves. Steinbeck is suggesting that Curley's wife fears the repercussions of being caught speaking to the other men on the ranch. This is particularly concerning given that this marriage is less than two weeks old and should still be in the honeymoon stage. Whilst it is never explicitly said, there is an underlying suggestion that Curley's wife lives with the same threat of violence that the other men on the ranch are subjected to. This fear is an example of the sexism that was common in 1930s America. Women were expected to know 'their place' in both the house and home, as they were perceived as being possessions of their respective partners. This dynamic would have inevitably resulted in controlling behaviour and violence, as men sought to reinforce a level of control over their partners.

As Candy constantly repeats 'Curley's pretty handy. He done quite a bit in the ring' and because of this, displays of violence are all too frequent when Curley is present. During the course of the novella, Curley is seen threatening Slim, George and even having a confrontation with Slim. Given the way that women were treated during 1930's America and the fear that his wife has it could be suggested that the threat of violence continues behind closed doors.



Curley