

How does John Steinbeck convey the tension of the situation in the card-playing passage of Chapter 3?

Look through the essay below, which was written in response to the above essay title. Use the specification, and assessment objectives, for your exam board to mark the essay. Don't just tick the essay at the end or write 'well done'; highlight or underline sentences or phrases that you think are particularly effective and make a note as to which of the assessment objectives they fit. Make a note of anywhere the essay could be improved and how this could be done (for example, don't just draw a cross next to something you don't agree with).

Once you have finished assessing the essay, compare your ideas with others in your group.

The card-playing section of chapter 3 is a particularly tense section because the reader and the people in the novel are waiting for a particular event to happen. Carlson has just taken Candy's smelly old dog away to shoot it and everyone is waiting to hear the shot. The fact that we know that the dog is going to be shot makes the waiting worse.

In the very first sentence of this section, the word "silence" is used three times. It is described as coming "into the room" which suggests that it is an unwanted invader. The characters do not really want to sit in silence because this means that they will be able to hear when the dog is shot and this will upset Candy. In total, this word is used seven times which conveys the feeling of tension because it is very unusual to sit in silence with a group of people; there is usually a small amount of noise.

The most poignant example of silence in the bunk house is in the last line of this section when we hear that Candy "rolled slowly over and faced the wall and lay silent". The tension has left the room now because the event that they were all waiting for has occurred, but it has obviously had a very great effect on Candy. His position and silence show the tension that he feels, probably because he is trying not to show his emotions to the other characters.

There is, in fact, some noise in this section of the novel but it is very quiet noise which adds emphasis to the silence that we encounter. The cards that George is shuffling make "a little snapping noise [which] drew the eyes of all the men in the room". Under ordinary circumstances, this noise would be so quiet that no-one would notice it but because everyone in the room is tense, they are more aware of things that are happening around them. The same is also true of the "little gnawing sound from under the floor". The fact that

everything else is so quiet makes these interruptions all the more dramatic and increases the tension a great deal.

A great deal of tension is also conveyed by the way in which time passes within the text. Everything seems to happen in slow-motion in this section of the novel, with time passing extremely slowly. Steinbeck describes how “A minute passed, and then another minute”. This shows that time is passing so slowly that the characters are noticing it. They are all sitting in the bunk house, waiting for something awful to happen, and because they are waiting, everything seems to be taking much longer than usual. The atmosphere is like that of a doctors’ waiting room where everyone sits in embarrassed silence, waiting for the inevitable to take place. The reader knows that this section cannot take very long to happen because it cannot take very long to shoot a dog but because they are anticipating hearing the shot, everything seems to take longer.

This tension is also apparent between the characters who do not know each other very well. None of them is really in a position to offer comfort to Candy, although Slim tries when he says “Candy, you can have any one of them pups you want.” Although this seems like a good offer, the reader knows that it was the dog that is about to be shot that meant something to Candy, because he had had her for years and that no other dog could replace her.

George tries to lighten the atmosphere by talking about Lennie but this actually increases the tension because he talks about him being “in the barn with his pup”. This shows that he is not really sensitive to how Candy is feeling and would, of course, draw Candy’s attention back to dogs. George also suggests “a little euchre” as a way to avoid the silence and tension, but again this actually makes the situation worse because it is obvious that he is trying to draw attention away from what is going on outside. Only Whit is brave enough to confront the situation when he says “What the hell’s taking him so long?”. This clearly shows the tension in the bunk house at this time because the strain of waiting has obviously affected him.

In this section of the novel, the author concentrates on very small details. As with his preoccupation with tiny noises, this make the atmosphere seem more tense because the characters and the reader are noticing things that they would not normally see. A good example of this is when Slim “subdued one hand with the other, he held it down”. This shows that Slim, who has been portrayed as calm and collected until this point, is also affected and moved by the tense atmosphere in the bunk house. George is described as shuffling the cards “nervously” because he too would be waiting to hear the shot and to deal

with whatever reaction Candy might have to that. On the whole, the men are very still which makes the tension worse because the reader feels that they are sitting very still in anticipation of what is about to happen.

The sentences in this section of the novel are quite short and this is extremely effective in conveying the tension of the scene because it makes the reader stop and think about what is happening. The opening paragraph:

It was silent outside. Carlson's footsteps died away. The silence came into the room. And the silence lasted.

is particularly effective because it moves very slowly towards the inevitable conclusion that the dog will be shot. The fact that we have to wait almost to the end of this section before "a shot sounded in the distance" works well because we know that it is coming, as do the characters, but we have to wait. This makes both the reader and the characters feel anxious because the atmosphere has chance to build up to a point where the shot is almost a relief.

So it is clear that tension is extremely important in this section of the novel and it is achieved by the author in a variety of ways from choice of words to the way in which he describes how time passes. I liked this section of the novel because it is an extremely vivid and powerful description of the events that take place which engages the reader.