

The Hero as a Victim of Bullying and Mobbing: A Critical Analysis of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*

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Abstract

*Bullying and mobbing are growing problems that need to be addressed at home and in the classroom. This is where literature can build a door in the wall. By experiencing problems of fictional characters, the readers, kids and adults, are better able to understand the consequences of their own actions and look for positive ways to change. The study will try to elucidate Steinbeck's depiction of the theme of victimization represented by bullying and mobbing the main character, Lennie, in *Of Mice and Men*. The current study will adapt Olweus' bullying circle to find out how Lennie has been victimized and the role of others in this victimization. Besides, one will shed light on the effects of bullying and mobbing on the hero's personality. It is expected to find out that the hero may develop anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder, and may suffer permanent physical or emotional damage.*

Keywords: heroes, victims, bullying, mobbing, Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, bullying circle

1. What is Bullying?

Dan Olweus (2001), creator of the *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program*, provides us with this commonly accepted definition for bullying:

A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students. (Olweus, 2001, pp.5-6)

Bullying is deliberate and the bully tries to upset the victim and hurt him/her emotionally or physically. Moreover, bullying is usually repeated and the person being bullied is picked on again and again, sometimes for a very long time. Therefore, bullying is considered as unfair since the victim either cannot or will not defend himself or herself.

Some children are more likely to be the victims of bullying than others. Those with an obvious physical characteristic, such as being overweight, can become targets, as can those with some form of disability. Those who are shy or who find it hard to stand up for themselves may also be vulnerable.

Olweus (2001) identified two types of victims: the passive victim and the provocative victim. Passive victims are described as anxious, insecure, appearing to do nothing to provoke attacks, and appearing not to defend themselves. Provocative victims are described as hot-tempered, restless, anxious and are the ones who will attempt to retaliate when attacked. Olweus maintained that the generally aggressive bullies were not unpopular, and they were often supported by two or three other boys in the class (usually boys are the main bullies). Besides, it has been shown that a large proportion of the (boy) victims, those of the passive category, were not aggressive or actively provoking, that is why they became easy prey to aggressive, more powerful bullies. According to Olweus (2001), the former victims would recover from the effects of bullying:

many of them (the former victims) would probably function reasonably well if they were not exposed to repeated bullying and harassment over long periods of time. The elevated levels of anxiety and stress that we could register in the school years were thus more a reflection of situation-related strain than of a relatively permanent personality disturbance. (Olweus, 2001, p. 11)

At the same time, Olweus (2001, p.11) emphasized that even though the former victims seemed to function well in a number of respects as young adults, “there were two dimensions on which they clearly differed from their peers: depressive tendencies and poor self-esteem.” These two problems were in fact the consequences of the earlier maltreatment (whether it was abuse, bullying, or mobbing) which left its scars on the victims’ minds. Bullying or peer harassment is a very important social problem which has short term and long term negative effects on the victims. When bullying happens, most of the attention is focused on the victim. But we need to pay attention to the bully, too. Bullies are often people who have been bullied or abused themselves, and may be vulnerable and angry. A lot can be done to help them deal with their pain and avoid taking it out on others. However, not all bullying happens at school. Most people assume that bullying happens exclusively at school, but it can happen anywhere, such as online and sometimes at home, possibly by an older sibling.

Dan Olweus (2001) has explained the problem of bullying by drawing a circle where one can recognize the victim, the bully, supporters, the defenders, and the passive bystanders. Figure 1 will present the bullying circle and the explanation of the roles of each individual. According to Olweus (2001), the victim of bullying represented by the letter (Y) is surrounded by the bully (A) who starts the bullying but he usually needs henchmen (B) who participate in the bullying by following the bully and his actions. The bully has another group of supporters (C) who approve the bullying but act passively and others (D) who support the bullying act without showing their open approval. Moreover, there is another group of onlookers (E) who watch the bullying but they do not care for the victim. Another group of onlookers (F) dislike the bullying act but they do not do anything to prevent it. The last group is represented by the letter (G) and they are the defenders of the victim who disapprove the bullying act and try to help the victim.

Bullying has different types such as:

1. Verbal bullying: this is when someone calls other person nasty names, or teases and jokes about the bullied in a cruel way. This can hurt someone’s feelings. This sort of teasing and name calling is particularly nasty if it is about someone’s family, race or religion, or about the way they look.
2. Physical bullying: it involves slapping, pushing, shoving, kicking, poking, elbowing, kneeling, tripping up, punching or hitting the person being bullied with weapons or other objects. It is also physical bullying when a bully deliberately damages the bullied person’s clothes or other personal property.
3. Threatening: sometimes the bully will threaten the bullied by getting him or her after school for example.
4. Gesture: the gestures are messages that we send without speaking. Some gestures can be threatening, and are used by bullies. These include shaking fists, and looks or glances that contain nasty messages.
5. Extortion: this means taking money or personal property from the person being bullied. Sometimes, bullies will force the bullied to steal for them or to damage property.
6. Ignoring someone, or always leaving them out of things such as when the same person is always left out of games or any activity.
7. Trying to make others dislike someone by making him or her unpopular by spreading lies about that person, or rumors and gossips.
8. Writing or drawing malicious things about someone like sending mean notes or drawings of the bullied. (Olweus, 2001; O’ Moore & Minton, 2004, pp.71-73)

Mobbing, on the other hand, is another form of bullying in which it takes place in groups. It involves making cruel jokes, humiliation, spreading rumours, isolating and excluding, shunning, intimidation, threatening, treating a person like an object, harassment and cruelty. Elliot (2003) argues that the term mobbing may be considered new but it has been depicted in literature especially in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, Stephen King’s *Carrie*, or the movie *Dead Poet’s Society*.

The word ‘mobbing’ is preferred to ‘bullying’ in those situations where a target is selected and bullied (mobbed) by a group of people rather than by one individual. However, every group has a ringleader. If this ringleader is an extrovert it will be obvious who is forcing group members into mobbing the selected target.

If the ringleader is an introvert type, he or she is likely to be in the background persuading and manipulating group members into mobbing the selected target; introvert ringleaders are much more dangerous than extrovert ringleaders. Throughout the mobbing experience, the target is deceived into fighting, blaming and trying to hold accountable the minor bullies of the mobbing group rather than the chief bully. The main reason a psychopathic chief bully gets away with his (or her) behaviour repeatedly is that no one wants to believe that he/she could be the monster he/she is.

Mobbing has a devastating effect on everyone who is exposed to it. It contributes to isolation, physical or mental illness, depression, violent or self-destructive behaviour and mistrust. The victim may act inappropriately due to prolonged extreme stress. (Elliot, 2003, p.5) Mobbing is always caused by a sort of conflict which is usually impersonal and becomes personal in terms of outcome. Elliot (2003, p.9) maintained that the cause of the mobbing can be anything such as:

Someone says the wrong thing at the wrong time. Someone is new to the school. Someone looks, acts, or talks differently. Someone is very smart or the opposite. Someone brags about his or her family. Someone wears clothes that are different or not the current style.

However, whatever the cause is, the mobbers use it as an excuse to engage in emotional abuse and attacking others. It has been found that mobbing can make the victim depressed and isolated. Some of the victims would either act violently or suffer in silence. Mainly, many would grow up lacking the self-confidence to realize their potentials.

2. The Hero as a Victim of Bullying and Mobbing

In *Of Mice and Men* John Steinbeck has depicted the characters of George and Lennie as typical ranch workers who were on their way to start their job in a farm. What makes the strong relationship between George and Lennie so strange is that most of the ranch workers travel alone. Loneliness sticks to the workers most of their lives but George and Lennie are different. In fact they depend on each other though Lennie is more dependent on George because of his mental disorder. Both of them have the same dream of having a farm, their own house, rabbits, pigs and cows, besides being their own boss and they keep on waiting to make this dream true.

'Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place. They come to a ranch an' work up a stake and then they go into town and blow their stake, and the first thing you know they're poundin' their tail on some other ranch. They ain't got nothing to look ahead to.' (*Of Mice and Men*, p.17)

Steinbeck has illustrated George as small in size but he works as the mind for both, Lennie and himself. Lennie, on the other hand, is bulky in size and very strong but he is just like a child since he has some mental disorder. Lennie is quite childish and has sweet dreams, while George is serious in dealing with things. George regards the farm dream as the best way to set them free from the cruelty of the world. However, Lennie is not serious and the only thing in his mind is the animals he wants to have in his farm. Therefore, George is Lennie's protector since everyone is abusing Lennie and hurting him.

The major irony in the book is that George kills Lennie because he loves him. He wants to spare Lennie from dying a brutal death at the hands of Curley and the other ranch hands who are enraged over the death of Curley's wife; therefore, he selflessly does the terrible deed himself, as a merciful act to his friend. Later, George has stolen Carlson's pistol which is the same pistol that killed Candy's old dog in order to save it from suffering and misery. Ironically, the ranch hands felt great sympathy and sorrow for Candy over the loss of his dog; but they feel no sympathy for George over losing his best friend and companion. Slim is the only one who realizes the irony of the shooting, and he tries to comfort George by telling him "you hadda" do it.

Lennie from the first day of his arrival has been bullied by Curley, the boss's son. It seems that Curley wants to show himself in front of others so he has chosen Lennie to be his victim because he is a big guy, looks nervous and naïve. Candy explained that Curley: "... the boss's son", he said quietly. "Curley's like a lot of little guys. He hates big guys. He's all the time picking scraps with big guys. Kind of like he's mad at 'em because he ain't a big guy. You seen little guys like that, ain't you? Always scrappy?" (*Of Mice and Men*)

In another occasion, Curley was looking for his wife and when he found that everyone was laughing at him he turned into Lennie and started to bully him verbally and physically: *“Come on, ya big bastard. Get on your feet. No big son-of-a-bitch is gonna laugh at me. I’ll show yawho ’syella.”* (Of Mice and Men)

Curley smashed Lennie’s nose but Lennie was so scared and wanted George to protect him but George instead wanted Lennie to defend himself against Curley’s bullying. Slim, on the other hand, another worker in the ranch, wanted to stop Curley but George prevented him from doing that and asked Lennie to defend himself. *“Get him, Lennie. Don’t let him do it.”* (Of Mice and Men) In this scene Lennie was the victim and Curley was bullying him while others like Carlson, Candy and Whit were just disengaged onlookers, watching what happens but it was not their business. George and Slim, on the other hand, were against Curley and defended Lennie verbally but they did not act. This bullying circle is illustrated in figure 2.

Lennie’s problem is that he likes tending soft things like mice, rabbits, and women but he cannot recognize how strong he is since he always crushes these things to death with his hands without meaning to do so. Lennie’s innocence led him to touch Curley’s wife’s hair (Curley is the boss’s son), and without tending to hurt her, he broke her neck. Everybody was looking for him to revenge but George could not stand seeing his friend being killed on the hands of the mob. George knows that people will not understand Lennie and his innocent motivations so he decides to kill Lennie by himself and save him from the cruelty of the world. In this scene the action against Lennie was mobbing since all the workers were looking for Lennie to kill him. Curley was the ringleader and his hatred towards Lennie turned into personal. Figure 3 shows that Lennie was victimized by the mob Curley, Carlson, Whit, and Crooks while George is the only one who wanted to protect Lennie. Slim also wanted to catch Lennie but he did not have the intention to kill him.

Lennie was bullied by others verbally since everyone was calling him by names even George his best friend. He was targeted because of his big size, innocence, childish behavior and foolishness. Lennie was bullied also physically by Curley by punching, hitting and finally by his deliberate intention to kill him. Moreover, Lennie was threatened by Curley from the first meeting and Curley also provoked others to dislike Lennie. Furthermore, Lennie was not only bullied by Curley but also mobbed by the other workers after the incident of killing Curley’s wife. Mobbing has an overwhelming effect on Lennie’s character and that was clear in his isolation, destructive behavior, to himself and others, and his mistrust since George is the only one in the whole world he trusts. According to Elliot (2003, p.14) the targeted person usually:

“feels confused, feels anxious, feels physically sick, becomes depressed, doesn’t know whom to trust, engages in self-isolation, may develop feelings of persecution or paranoia, may act inappropriately, may engage in destructive behaviour, toward themselves or others, may develop acute anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder, and may suffer permanent physical or emotional damage.”

These effects of mobbing were clear in the last scenes when Lennie escaped to hide in the bushes and he started to see his dead aunt and a giant rabbit who were blaming him for doing the wrong things. In fact they were just his inner voice, his unconscious that has been raised at that moment to reveal his destroyed personality. Lennie sees his aunt Clara and the giant rabbit during his psychotic episode. His aunt Clara took care of Lennie when he was young. Lennie's brain remembers her as an authority figure. For this reason, Lennie's brain chooses an image of her to place guilt upon him. In their dream, Lennie tended the rabbits. Lennie's interpretation of this great, fuzzy creature is an understandable object in which to relay his unaware guilt. The rabbit, being one of the most important symbols of Lennie's life, is used to show Lennie that his dream will not come true. This thought is a picture of his dream turning on him. The thought of rabbits normally makes Lennie happy, but the guilt he feels conquers him. The images of his aunt Clara and the rabbit are his way of coming to an understanding of the guilt in which he is not consciously aware.

Lennie's mental break-down was brought on by a heavy feeling of guilt lingering in his simple mind. His brain's simple thought process showed Lennie what he was thinking in the unconscious part of his mind, mainly guilt. This dream was triggered by the death of Curley's wife, along with the under-lying thought of George's life, Lennie's aunt Clara, and tending rabbits. Lennie was so confused and scared and preferred to isolate himself from the others. His feelings of harassment, fear and distrust developed a kind of duality in his personality represented by the appearance of his dead aunt and the giant rabbit. Lennie was so confused and anxious; he couldn't realize his own strength and the terrible deeds he had done happened with because of that strength

3. Conclusions

The current study has opened up a trend towards adapting the psychological and the sociological studies in literature. Though this trend is not innovative and well known in the literary analysis, using Olweus's bullying circle (2002) and adapting the types and negative effects of bullying and mobbing is considered pioneering. There are many characters in literature who have been depicted as victims of abuse, bullying and mobbing, therefore it is interesting to examine the effects of this problem on their personalities. Besides, bullying and mobbing are serious problems and children and adults should be taught how to recognize them, avoid them and report them. Therefore, it would be interesting for teachers to use literary texts such as Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* to shed light on the abuse issue and help the readers, children and adults, to be aware of the effects of abuse on their personality.

Teaching the literary text from a pedagogical aspect can help the readers to recognize that there is a character such as Lennie who has been influenced by the negative effects of bullying and mobbing and turned into a passive character who, according to Olweus' description of the victims, can be regarded as a passive victim who was anxious, insecure, and did not try to do anything to provoke the attacks or to defend himself. He has developed feelings of persecution and paranoia, and engaged in destructive behaviour, toward himself and others and that led to a permanent emotional damage. In fact the most important thing is that no one deserves to be abused, bullied, or mobbed even if that person is a fictional character and not real.

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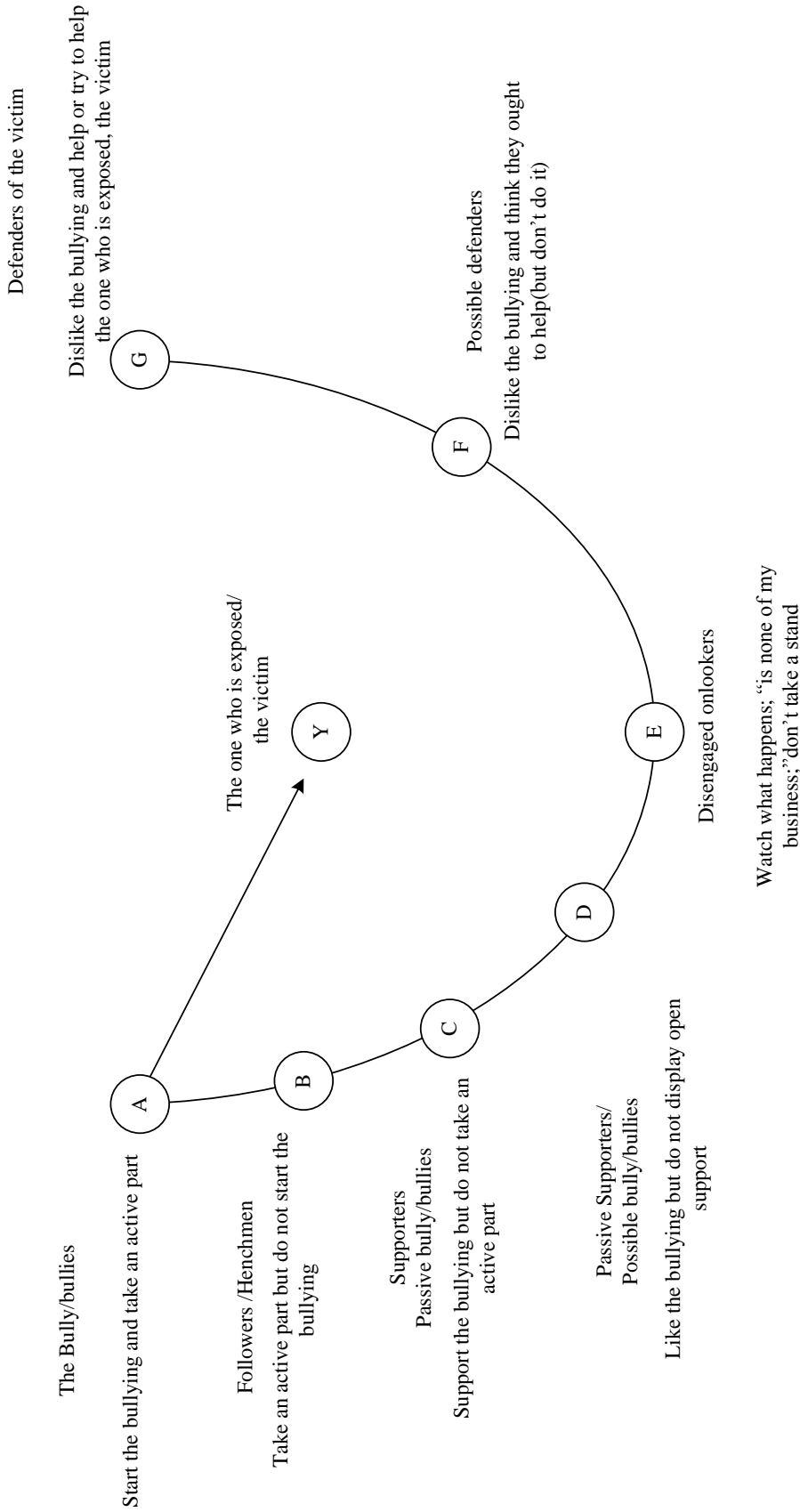


Figure 1: The Bullying Circle: Students' modes of reaction/roles in an acute bullying situation. (Olweus, 2001, p. 15)

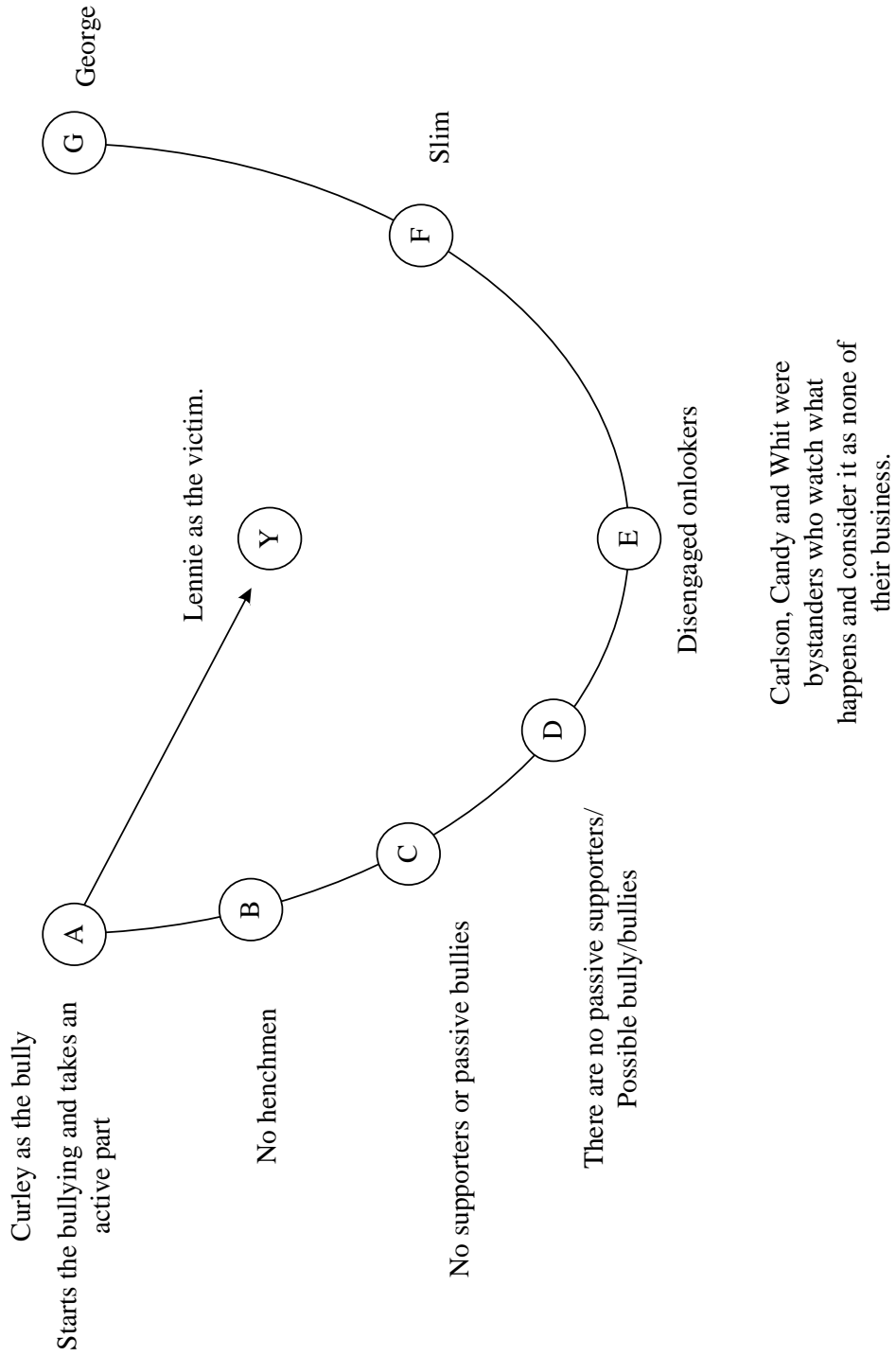


Figure 2: The Bullying circle of Lennie as the victim and Curley as the main bully adapted from Olweus' bullying circle (2002).

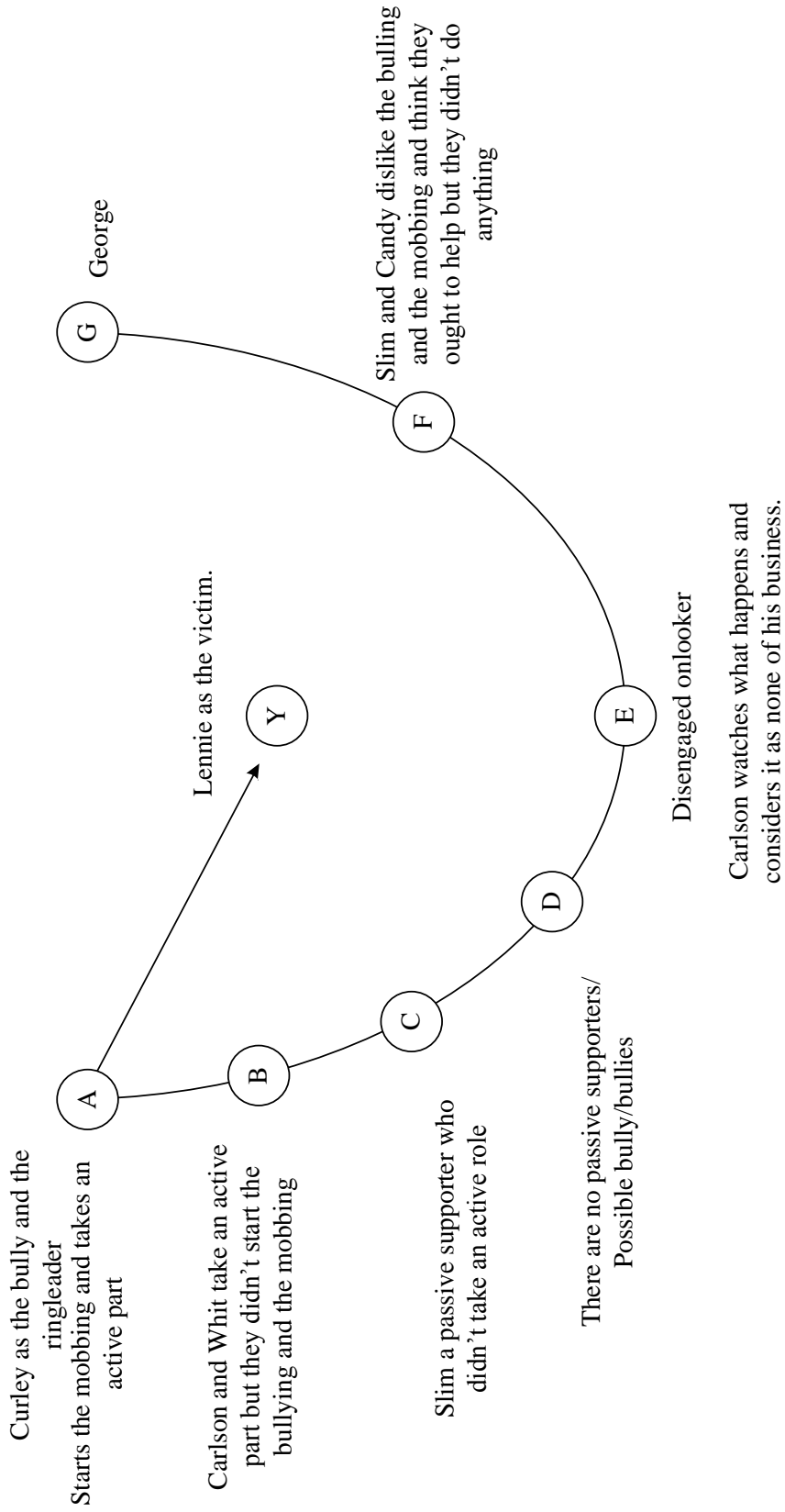


Figure 3: The bullying and mobbing circle of Lennie as the victim and Curley as the main bully and ringleader adapted from Olweus' bullying circle (2002).