

The role of women and african americans in of mice and men

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Life during the Great Depression is very difficult for most Americans, however, it is even harder for women and African Americans. Steinbeck includes women and African Americans in *Of Mice and Men* to show the moral issues of this time, especially sexism and racism. The prejudice against women and African Americans also leads to their social isolation and lack of companionship. To demonstrate these issues he uses the characters of Crooks, an African American stable hand, and Curley's wife, an aspiring actress. It seems like in a strangely poignant way to show their loneliness, Crooks and Curley's wife are the only African American and women characters in the book. These characters are used in the plot to complete a depiction of life at a ranch during Great Depression.

During these times, women did not have rights. They are societally limited to the roles of creation and procreation. Steinbeck uses the character of Curley's wife to depict sexism at the ranches during that time. She faces seclusion in the busy ranch and feels out of place among the ranch workers who do not respect her. The ranch workers viewed every woman including Curley's wife as a whore.

They also view her as Curley's possession and don't want to be caught interacting with her. Another reason that Curley's wife is mistreated by the workers is because they do not see her as an independent unit, but an extension of her husband. This is made clear by the fact that she is never referred to by her given name. Although Curley's wife is an aspiring actress, she has learnt that only way to get attention is by looking and acting sexually desirable. When she acts suggestively by flirting to get noticed, the

farm workers evade her because they fear retribution from Curley. When George first meets her he remarks, “. . . I never seen no piece of jail bait worse than her. ” (Steinbeck 32) Just from her looks and behavior, he creates a derogatory label about Curley’s wife without knowing her true character. George is also concerned that Lennie would again get into trouble because of a woman. With such characterizations, Steinbeck is able to convince the readers of the disrespectful and neglectful way in which women of that time are perceived and treated. In an interesting way, the discrimination at the hands of white men is highlighted in the interaction between Lennie and Curley’s wife. Lennie’s respect towards Curley’s wife starkly contrasts with her treatment at the hands of all other men. When she corners Lennie in the barn she tells him, “ Well, I ain’t told this to nobody before.

And because she had confided in him, she moved closer to Lennie and sat beside him”(Steinbeck 89). Curley’s wife has been harboring a cold mask in order to make her impervious to constant negative treatment and neglect. When Lennie gives her the attention and respect, she abandons it and reveals her kind and intelligent self. It also portrays that workers wrongfully avoid her, because she doesn’t have any evil ulterior motive. Crooks, as an African American, is subject to racism from the white people including white women. He is treated as a second class citizen and faces segregation as is common during that time. “ Crooks, the negro stable buck, had his bunk in the harness; a little shed that leaned off the wall of the barn. On one side of the little room there was a square four paned window, and on the other, a

narrow plank door leading into the barn. ” (Steinbeck 65) Crooks doesn't get to live with other white men in the bunk house, instead his space is in the shed near the barn. “ I ain't wanted in the bunk house...” (Steinbeck 68) He complains against his treatment by the white people, about their attitudes that forces loneliness on him. When Lennie asks Crooks why he is not allowed inside the bunkhouse Crooks says,“ Cause I'm black. They play cards in there, but I can't play because I'm black. They say I stink. Well, I tell you, all of you stink to me. ”(Steinbeck 68) This demonstrates how other workers separate themselves from Crooks due to the differences in their skin color. It is also interesting that Steinbeck has portrayed the African Americans from their perspective, thus making the narrative about the African American treatment more authentic.

Similar to the way Lennie's treatment of Curley's wife magnifies the sexism exhibited by other men at the ranch, respectful interactions between Lennie, who is white, and Crooks highlights racism existing at the ranch. Lennie's handicap in a way renders him completely unconscious of color. Crooks has built barriers around him, both physical and mental, to protect him from daily abuse at the hands of the farm workers. Lennie's innocent interaction succeeds in drawing out Crooks from behind the walls. Lennie and Crooks are juxtaposing characters: while Lennie is physically strong but unintelligent, Crooks is surrounded by books but is physically very weak. Their exchanges introduce the idea that unity is possible and that racism can be avoided if people can accept each other. Lennie is also the only person to whom Crooks opens up willingly, because Lennie is the lone character unable

to form opinions without bias. Dreams also play an important role in the development of both Curley's wife and Crooks character. Both characters are subject to animosity from the workers and therefore lead a life of loneliness. Therefore, their dream is to escape this pattern of loneliness and leap at any opportunity presented to them. " They swung their heads toward the door. Looking in was Curley's wife. "(Steinbeck 77)

She then ridicules Crooks and reminds him of his limited rights. Later " George stood framed in the door, and he looked disapprovingly about. "(Steinbeck 82). After they leave Crooks looks at the door, before continuing on with his routine. The usage of a door in this scenario shows how the white man can stand in the way of Crook's happiness and dreams, which is represented by the door that represents the opening to the rest of the world. He shying away from pursuing his dreams once he is reminded of this fact, shows how he knows it is better for him to stay in the background because the people are not able to quickly change their minds about his kind. He also returns to his previous activities, showing that he has to continue with what he was doing before, and not hope for a better life. Curley's wife also faces struggles because of her limited rights. " But my ol' lady wouldn't let me. "(Steinbeck 88) This shows that Curley's wife wanted an opportunity to have her voice matter, but was not allowed to pursue it. Instead by marrying Curley, she hopes to get away from the controlling nature of her mom.

However, Curley is also of a controlling nature, and she finds out that it is difficult to find a safe haven from dominant people, because as a female, she will always be seen as someone else's property. Thus her aspirations and

hopes fade remain a dream. Steinbeck successfully used the characters of Curley's wife and Crooks to capture the rampant sexism and racism at the ranch during the Great Depression. He has succeeded in showing the intelligence of the characters simmering underneath a deep discontent due to their treatment at the hands of others. Both don't have a right to dream, to have a community, and in the case of women, a right to a name. While white women are very low in social status, lower than mentally and physically handicapped white men, they are still higher in status compared to the African American men. Having these vividly drawn characters at a ranch are critical to portraying the theme of friendship, loneliness and the cruel nature of the social inequalities festering in a capitalist economy.