

Mice and men – role of women

Literature



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In the world of migrant workers in 1930s America, the main roles of women was to help and serve men, and were mostly regarded as either domestic housewives, or highly sexualized objects to be used and discarded. Women were traditionally and commonly thought of as the homemakers that took care of the home and children in this time. In M&M, women are represented quite negatively, and as if they are to blame for all the men's troubles.

In the novella, the migrant laborers were unable to settle down and have a relationship with someone; so the primary role of women in their lives is a way of relaxing and relieving themselves from hard work and pressure. Curley's wife is the major female character in the book. She is domestic, as she is married and is living at home, but characterized as especially flirtatious and like a temptress. She is pinned as a troublemaker and a scapegoat for all the anxieties and difficulties of the characters.

In M&M, she is also mostly described by the men as being a prostitute and them commenting on her appearance. This depicts how they thought of women as always trying to please men, and that they are just objects and something for them to look at and for their own gratification. Especially with their lifestyle, and how their only interaction with women is in brothels, they don't hold them to the same esteem as they do each other at all because they haven't lived in cities and in modern towns.

So, they don't know how the culture in the rest of the nation is changing because of their isolated jobs as migrant workers. Curley's wife is always referred to as such in the book; she is never given a name. This could be to describe how Curley's wife is both an important character in the book and a generic one as well. Leaving the character nameless makes the reader pay

closer attention to her, as opposed to if she had an average name. But the term 'Curley's wife' is also a generalization, and it could be used as a term to encompass the idea of a wife in that time in general.

It also may be to emphasize the inappropriateness of having a woman like her on the ranch, and her significance. Another inference of women bringing only trouble to men's lives is when the incident in Weed was mentioned, where a woman accused Lennie of rape, and they got ran out of the town, leaving their jobs. This portrayal, by association, implies the author's idea, or the idea he wants to present, of women in general, and how they have no place in his idealized world structured around the brotherly bonds of men.

In this time period, contrary to the book's ideals of women, they were actually revered for their roles as homemakers, because they had to keep their families well and together in the midst of the Great Depression in the USA. The majority of women were housewives, and their role in society was limited and precise. Everyone was aware of the standard function of the woman and a wife - deviating from this idea was rare. This idea, to a much lesser extent, is still in motion today, especially in certain cultures.

This was also shown in the fashions of the women at the time. In the decade before, women became very revealing and open with clothing and lifestyle. But, when the Great Depression hit, they again reverted to being more conservative; this could signify how the Depression hardened and aged the people of the nation. The number of working women was very slow in growth. Females doing jobs that are normally attributed as more masculine, like paying bills and working outside of home, was considered vastly odd and distasteful.

Women also received lower wages than men, and, if they did work, they generally were in traditionally feminine professions, like nursing and school teaching. There were also many double standards between men and women. For example, it was considered extremely taboo to be in a relationship before marriage for both men and women. But, as there was no child support or abortion in the 1930's, women that became pregnant before marriage would normally be left alone with the child, as the father would simply leave the town.

This left only the mother and the child ostracized, even though the act is forbidden for men as well. This is linked to the huge difference in judgment of a promiscuous man and a promiscuous woman; a woman that is very unrestrained will be judged much more harshly and bitterly than a man. This results in the customary notion that men are of different or higher status than women. In this era, women were also becoming more influential and prevalent in society. Many women, like Amelia Earhart, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Jane Addams, were becoming more and more revolutionary and exceptional in the world.

This was very different from the past, because national or global impact in culture had been largely male-dominated. Women were making history, and were becoming exemplary in their fields. The women's suffrage acts had also taken place in the years before this era, so women had only recently gained the right to vote and other liberties. This could also be a factor to their status in the 30's, and how people were still accustomed to women having lesser rights and being beneath men.

But it also emphasizes how women were becoming more confident and stronger because they stood up to their own government. The 1930s was a decade where women were judged and thought of differently. The status of women in the nation was changing, and they took on all kinds of different roles in different places all over the country. In M&M, they were basically thought of as objects because of the migrant workers' way of life. But in the rest of the USA, they were keeping to old traditions and customs, and at the same time, starting to become more powerful and influential.