

How does Steinbeck
present Curly's wife



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

'Of Mice and Men' is one of Nobel Prize winning author John Steinbeck's most poignant. Set in the 1930s during the Great Depression, it features two farm workers called George and Lennie. They travel around together in search of work, sharing a dream of a place of their own - a small ranch where they can live and work for themselves. It tells the story of how violence may erupt to destroy those dreams. Curley's wife - as she is known to the audience - is the only woman on the ranch. Without the identity of a name, she is known only by association of the man she doesn't even like.

Despite her marriage to Curley, she flaunts herself around the ranch in inappropriate clothing. 'She had full, rouged lips... She wore a cotton house dress and red mules,' flirting with ranch hands and is conscious of the effect she has on men. These clothes and her behaviour, I think, are designed to provoke interest and attention rather than to invite intimacy. She seems preoccupied with strategies to avoid detection from her husband and manages this by continuously asking of his whereabouts. 'Have any of you boys seen Curley?' Like George, Lennie and later on Candy, Curley's wife has a dream despite it being one of great contrast to theirs.

She has an ambition to work in films - 'coulda been in the movies and worn nice clothes' - and this is no doubt stemmed from her desire for attention and is linked to her loneliness and insecurities on the ranch as she bitterly resents not being treated as an individual. Men make promises to her - 'he says he was gonna out me in the movies' - but she appears to lack the intelligence to realise the emptiness of their promises. The perceptions we make of Curley's wife are corrupted from the views of the ranch hands.

Because sexuality is her only weapon she is referred to as 'jailbait' and 'a tart' 'Jesus what a tramp.'

George has reason to be weary of her presence especially with Lenny around and the incident in Weed. 'Listen to me you crazy bastard... Don't you even look at that bitch Curley's wife is first presented to us on page 32 'the rectangle of sunshine in the doorway was cut off' a girl was standing there looking in' Curley's wife has brought darkness supposedly symbolising the potential danger of her character. During the last chapter Steinbeck cleverly attempts to alter our perception of Curley's wife by portraying her in a different light. During chapter five, Lenny has just killed one of Slim's puppies by clumsily petting it.

His tendency to inflict damage through trying to show affection is become more prominent. Steinbeck creates an atmosphere of tragedy and doom in which the reader is aware of Lenny's anxiety' and rattled the halter chains. 'Curley's wife enters wearing 'a bright cotton dress' and 'red ostrich feathers' and the reader already knows of Lenny's attraction to the colour red which creates a sense of painful inevitability. Her face is 'made up' and her 'curls' are in place... This suggested to me that she has obviously made herself as seductive as possible.

Curley's wife is attracted to Lenny because he has got the better of her husband. I think she has worked out an arrangement to ensure that Lenny and her will be alone without interruption but Lenny is acutely aware of George's instructions to avoid conversation with her as well as the consequences of not being able to 'tend the rabbits.' She is desperate to

talk to him ' you're a nice guy, why can't I talk to you? ' and when getting the chance to do so the words pour out of her in her passion for communication although Lenny barely listens.

Here she describes her desire to be an actress, her naivete in thinking her ' old lady' had stolen the letter and why she married Curley and not liking him. Yet it is at this point that despite her provocative dress sense and her sensuality we realise that she wants only to talk to Lenny ' why can't I talk to you? I never talk to nobody. I get awful lonely' and comfort him when he tells her how he has killed the puppy, ' don't you worry none. ' Steinbeck has cleverly created a more passionate portrayal, someone we can feel sympathy for.

At the point where Curley's wife offers for Lenny to stroke her hair ' feel right round there, feel how soft it is' the audience are uncertain as to whether this is an innocent, childish act referring to its texture or that she is knowingly leading Lenny towards a sexual encounter. It is also apparent at this period, of how young she actually is, the act of stroking hair is very harmless and childlike, not what we would expect of her character earlier in the novel. She is likened to a little girl who wants to feel physical contact without sexual trace.

When Lenny is petting Curley's wife's hair he proceeds in ' mussing it up' I noticed how she only struggled when she came to this realisation again pointing to her self-image and vanity. Lenny mistakenly breaks Curley's wife's neck and is fatally killed. Lenny escapes and we are left with a description of the setting of the barn and of her, ' and the meanness and the

planning's and the discontent and the ache for attention were all gone from her face' here Steinbeck sums up everything we already know about her but in a way that transforms the way we think about her.

Still with flawless skin she appears 'pretty and simple...sweet and young' a complete contrast to what is perceived of her in earlier chapters. I think her death could have just as well of been caused by Lenny's unthinking roughness as by any decisions of hers that things had gone too far. A 'shepherd bitch' symbolises an entity that Curley's wife will never possess, this being children 'jumped in among the puppies.' Curley's wife is undoubtedly one of the most poignant characters in the novel and one that Steinbeck portrays his feeling for more than any other character.