

# John Steinbeck essay sample



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John Steinbeck once said of Curley's wife, ' She's a nice girl, not a floozy'.

How does Steinbeck present Curley's wife in ' Of Mice and Men'?

In this essay I will show how Steinbeck presents Curley's wife in a number of ways throughout the novel ' Of Mice and Men', showing both how she is portrayed as a ' nice girl' as well as a ' floozy'. This novel was set during the great depression and is written around two key themes of the American dream, which every ' ranch hand' owned their own patch of land, and loneliness, the only common feeling that each individual in the novel feared. Loneliness was the main theme that caused Curley's wife to be interpreted in a negative way by the other ranch men.

The very first time we meet Curley's wife is by the narrative description, in the doorway of the bunkhouse where her image is hidden behind a darkened silhouette standing in the doorway - '... a rectangle of sunshine in the doorway was cut off'. This is a suggestion that she'll be trouble as she brings a sudden darkness into the bunkhouse. The metaphor creates an image of the sunlight being extinguished by her and casting a dark shadow over the men in the bunkhouse. It is also a demonstration of ' femme fatale' as she appears so be a symbol of danger with Steinbeck presenting her introduction dramatically, as a seductress who will only bring misfortune. Another aspect of Curley's wife we discover in her this same section is the fact that she wears a lot of red - ' full, rouged lips... wore a cotton house dress and red mules...'. Red is a seductive colour which is often associated with danger or threat - Steinbeck successfully portrays this and instantly colours the readers view on Curley's wife.

Curley's wife's body language suggests a lot about her character in this passage - '...leaned against the door frame so that her body was thrown forward'. She seeks attention; this is made clear as later in the novel we discover that she's experiencing a loveless relationship with her newly wed husband. The fact that she dresses inappropriately for a ranch suggests that she has a lot of spare time on her hands and uses this time to groom. She takes pride in her appearance and only seeks to impress those around her.

We only know more about Curley's wife through the comments of the men at the ranch. Everyone refers to her as 'Curley's wife' so doesn't have her own identity, therefore is not addressed as a person but as a possession.

Prejudice leads to her loneliness as she has no rights and feels isolated.

Every worker on the ranch appears to try to avoid Curley's wife as they fear the consequences that Curley could put upon them if he discovers anything suspicious. Because of this, she's a lonely character and seeks attention from others as Curley doesn't give her any; however, she sometimes comes across as being desperate without it being her intention. One of the workers on the ranch describes her as a 'tart' and a woman that would 'sell out for twenty bucks' - this would influence the other workers not to get involved with her by making Curley's wife's life on the ranch a challenging one in order for people to understand her intentions of being friendly rather than desperate.

The negative feelings towards Curley's wife start changing after she reveals more about herself in Crooks' room. She claims to be looking for Curley but after cold responses from the men she starts talking about her desire to live her own life. However, she shows signs of lack of sensitivity by referring to

the men as leaving 'the weak ones here'. Although she has a low social status, she takes advantage of them and finds them an easy target. While discussing the life she hoped for, we discover that she has a dream of her own like everyone else on the ranch - '...he could've put me in pitchers'. Her dream has been shattered just like the others' on the ranch. Dreams were what people lived for; Curley's wife's dream has gone therefore she has no motivation to life. The reader starts to sympathize with her until she starts verbally attacking the men and implies her apathetic feelings towards her newly wed husband.

She can be a racist and cruel character - '...a nigger an' a dum-dum and a lousy ol' sheep'. Verbally insulting Crooks and many more makes her feel as if she has authority over others by putting them down. Steinbeck seems to suggest that she treats people in a callous way because that's the way she's been treated. The author reminds us of the terrible consequences of loneliness on people's lives, one of the key themes of the novel. The last feeling we have towards Curley's wife in this passage is one about her being mistreated. Her use of words sometimes offend the others - moving from '... smiling at them.' to referring Crooks as a 'nigger'. In her nature she isn't a mean character and her intentions are mostly innocent. However, she responds to the way she is treated, suggesting that she's not a floozy but someone who has been misunderstood. At this stage in the novel, we begin feeling sympathy towards Curley's wife who's ended up in a loveless marriage.

By the final scene in the novel our view on Curley's wife has significantly changed. She appears a vulnerable character - 'her words tumbled out in a

passion of communication as though she hurried before her listener could be taken away'. She rarely gets the opportunity to speak to anyone about her past and her feelings and she didn't want to miss this as Lennie was willing to hear her story. She doesn't trust anyone on the ranch - ' Well, I ain't told this to nobody before...'. This shows that she doesn't have the confidence to confide in anyone as no one's shown an interest to have a friendship with her. Curley's wife doesn't intimidate Lennie as he's not intimidating her and has the confidence to confide in him but feels a little uncertain about Lennie at first - ' Curley's wife moved away from him a little'. However, she quickly gets reassured and the desperation for friendship takes over which lead to serious consequences.

The reader gets a sense of her dislike towards Curley and how even the smallest things irritate her ' Take Curley. His hair is jus' like wire'. She doesn't want to be with Curley but the fact that her dream had been shattered had forced her to marry a man she didn't actually like. Even though she knows how dangerous Lennie can be with delicate things, Curley's wife is still desperate for attention and invites him to touch her soft hair. Curley's wife had no intention of causing her own death from her flirtatious ways but the desperation of having a friendship was too good an opportunity to pass. She wanted to feel loved and she experiences that for a moment but the closer she got to the dream, the more likely it would end in tragedy. She was clinging on to her dream and when she finally experienced what she longed for, she died; this is true for many of the other characters and their dreams.

The significance of Curley's wife's death is quite important. Steinbeck gave her a peaceful death as she was really a nice person but was portrayed badly by others. This is the first and only time we see Curley's wife at peace. Her death reinforces the theme of friendship as all Curley's wife was looking for was a companionship. She plays a big role in keeping people's dreams alive as when she dies, many others lose out on their own dreams e. g. Candy, George and Lennie's dreams are shattered as a consequence of the death. She also brought out a different side to characters including Slim. Slim is a cool character and people respect him for treating everyone equally, including Curley's wife however, as a contrast, her death brought out his gentle and compassionate side. The reader's feelings towards Curley's wife are now entirely sympathetic.

Curley's wife as a character remains consistent throughout the novel in the way she speaks and behaves, however, our opinions of her change dramatically as we near the end of the book. Steinbeck colours the reader's first impression of her as the other characters refer to her as a 'tart', 'floozy' and a girl that would 'sell out for twenty bucks'. We also have the impression that she refuses to stick with her husband and would rather flirt with every other man on the ranch. When we hear more of her voice, rather than the narrative and others' perspectives, the reader begins to feel sympathy for her. As we are never told her name she comes across as someone who is the property of Curley and this is strongly portrayed when the 'new-comers' are told to not stray from him. Her dreams had been shattered very early in life and had forced her to get married with her life cut short by her desire for human contact.

To conclude, Steinbeck presents Curley's wife in a number of ways throughout the novel. He often colours our opinion of her at the start which is then completely changed by the end when a lot more is revealed about her, making us feel sympathy rather than disdain.